ABSTRACT

NJOKU, JOSEPHINE I. B.A. Wiley College, 1963
M.Ed. Praire View A&M, 1970
M.Ed. The University of Mississippi, 1981

CHINUA ACHEBE'S PERCEPTION
OF THE EVOLVING ROLE OF WOMEN IN IGBO SOCIETY

Advisor: Dr. Olu Osinubi

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This study examines the roles of women in Igbo society as depicted in Achebe's fiction. The dissertation explores how Achebe presents women in relation to men in Igbo society during four historical epochs -- precolonial, colonial, postcolonial, and contemporary periods. Achebe begins his portrayal of women's roles in the traditional society and dramatizes the consequences of colonialism on such roles.

The study finds that women's roles are a reflection of the times in which they lived, and Achebe's fiction captures the evolution of women's roles with a remarkable degree of historical realism. The conclusion is that Achebe's fiction reflects women's roles truthfully and his prophetic vision that changes are inevitable comes true in a society whose traditional values have been transformed by the intrusion of colonialism.

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Name: Josephine Ibari Njoku
Street Address: 171 E Rust Avenue
City, State and Zip: Holy Springs, MS 38635

The director of this dissertation is:

Professor: Dr. Olu Osinubi
Department: English
School: Arts and Sciences, Clark Atlanta University
Office Telephone: (404) 880-8176

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# CHINUA ACHEBE'S PERCEPTION OF THE EVOLVING ROLE OF WOMEN IN IGBO SOCIETY

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR

THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF ARTS IN HUMANITIES

BY

JOSEPHINE I. NJOKU

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

In this study, a number of references to Chinua Achebe's novels and short stories contain abbreviations such as the following:

(TFA) ---------- Things Fall Apart

(NLA) ---------- No Longer At Ease

(AOG) ---------- Arrow of God

(AMP) ---------- A Man of the People

(AOS) ---------- Anthills of the Savannah

(GAW) ---------- Girls At War

# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

In contemporary literary criticism, perhaps no issue is more contentious than the issue of gender representation. Many literary artists who have represented women in their fiction have had their constructed images of women subjected to a variety of analyses, some sympathetic to the artists, some not so sympathetic. The more traditional approaches of exploring the images of women in canonical literature and critiquing the realism of such images have given way to more complex, and more radical, feminist approaches that investigate and condemn male power and male domination in literary works. On the issue of gender representation in literature, Philippa Gregory (1996), in her article, "Love Hurts", argues that

> The eighteenth century novels tell a powerful story of male adventure and female suffering, of male freedom and female restrictions. They were written at a time when women had no political or financial rights and they dramatise and glamorise female

> dependency. But between then and now women have demanded and won political equality, the right to own and keep their property, have been promised financial equality in the labour market and equality of opportunity. Women can control their own fertility, they can be sexually active outside marriage, they can choose to marry, to co-habit or to live alone. One might therefore expect that the modern novels would reflect, perhaps even celebrate, the liberated heroine (141).

Of course, many of the issues that Philippa Gregory raises above about gender representation in literature are somewhat alien to the bulk of fiction written by African authors. Most African writers, with the possible exception of female writers such as Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria) and Ama Ata Aidoo (Ghana), do not produce fiction in which women intentionally celebrate their lives. Chinua Achebe is a prime example of such authors, as well as a primary exemplar of the African novel. Many of the female characters that Achebe portrays in his novels appear to have been submerged or made conspicuously invisible. It is not surprising therefore that this 'conspicuous invisibility' of women has been a source of criticism of his works. Because Achebe is such an important figure in African literature, and a writer from a

region of the world where gender roles have been severely criticized for being too much in favor of men, the present study assumes that a more careful examination of Achebe's works would reveal the dynamics of gender roles in his works, and that such an examination would also contribute to an unbiased discussion and evaluation of Achebe's portrayal of gender roles in an African society.

Contemporary feminist criticism has, undoubtedly, brought a new insight to our understanding of power relations among the genders in fiction, and has also expanded our vision of postmodernist criticism. Feminist criticism has also censured many of the personal or familial relationships that society has taken for granted for so long. Linda LeMoncheck (1995), for example, has observed that feminists, especially the liberal feminists, view the relationship between men and women to be, by its very nature, oppressive. She also indicates that the liberal feminists assume that the roles that women perform as housewife and mother make them domestic slaves to their husbands (30-31). Clearly, many of the gender roles that exist or have existed in traditional societies, including Achebe's society, would be a complete anathema to feminist theorists and feminist activists alike. However, the present study does not pretend to use a feminist approach to

the reading of Achebe's works, but rather a more eclectic approach. Thus, this analysis of gender roles is informed by a feminist moral vision, but the study itself is not a feminist criticism of Achebe's fiction. To do so, in the opinion of this writer, would be to miss the point of his fiction. Achebe's fiction covers a broad time period in Igbo society in which gender roles have progressively changed with the times, and it is on the basis of this historical realism that Achebe's fiction should be judged.

This dissertation will critically examine Achebe's portrayal of women and their roles in Igbo society, including how the roles have changed over time from the colonial period to postcolonial times. Achebe's five novels and his short stories offer ample material for analyzing his portrayal of female character roles in traditional and contemporary Igbo society. The texts reflect a perception that the roles have changed considerably, but his evaluation of the change seems ambiguous. The works will be considered in the order of their chronological setting. This approach informs the focus of this study to investigate Achebe's perception of the evolving status of women in Igbo society. The approach also allows us to effectively capture the various stages of the evolution of gender roles in a society that has also undergone change.

The fictional works covered in this study are those published from 1958 to 1987, representing a broad historical period from the first incursions of British colonialism into Igboland (including the most remote villages of the territory) to the end of British colonialism and modern times. The most focused periods in Achebe's works which are also relevant to our study are the pre-colonial period, circa 1700-1800; initial colonialism, circa 1800-1900; emerging political independence, 1955-1965; the Biafran war, 1967-1970; and the post-Biafran period and contemporary life, circa 1970 to present time. These periods roughly coincide with different epochs in Igbo society in which perceptible differences may be noticed in the roles that women perform in Igbo society. The periods also serve as reference points from which the roles of women in Igbo society may be usefully explored.

Taking all of his novels together, Achebe may be said to have provided a fictionally reconstructed history of the Igbo society. Indeed, Achebe himself seems to readily acknowledge this fact. Commenting on the historical significance of his works, Achebe (1970) says:

> I will be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones set in the past) did no more than teach my readers their past - with all its imperfections ...

> Art is important but so is education of the kind I have in mind. And I don't see that the two need be mutually exclusive (1-2).

As Robert Wren (1980) also rightly indicates, Achebe's world is not mythic and should not be seen as such; Achebe, he argues, roots his characters and their actions in a realistic, if fictional, world (38). The central concern of this study, however, is to explore how Achebe's 'historically-minded' fiction depicts the role of women in Igbo society, and without committing what might be called the 'ethnographic fallacy' -- that is, seeing Achebe's works as pure history or a documentary ethnographic account of Igbo society. The historical content of Achebe's works is clearly helpful in understanding the evolution of the Igbo society, but because the works are fictional they cannot be taken as history in any absolute sense.

A few scholars have pointed out the tendency to commit the ethnographic fallacy in the reading of Achebe's works. In an essay titled, "Narrative, Metacommentary, and Politics in a 'Simple' Story", Wahneema Lubiano (1991) identifies the pervasive tendency for some readers, especially students, to overemphasize the ethnographic value of Achebe's works, while ignoring cultural and ritual details. In other words, many inexperienced readers tend to reduce Achebe's works to

simplistic anthropology, failing to grasp the essence of his society's values and rituals. Wahneema Lubiano tells us, that

> My undergraduate students consistently respond to *Things Fall Apart* by insisting on the ethnographic value of Achebe's work. Students seem unwilling to apply to so different a text the literary tools they are learning to use with texts whose "realism" they recognize. Instead, they self-consciously valorize what they see as the novel's cultural authenticity. Strange indeed is this insistence on simplicity and anthropology in response to the wealth of cultural and ritual detail in Achebe's text. . . (107).

Surely, it is a laudable goal to avoid the 'ethnographic fallacy' in the reading of Achebe's works; but completely divorcing his works from their ethnographic value may not be that simple or easy. While the ethnographic content of his works is useful, it is clearly unimaginative to see his works purely on ethnographic terms. It should be admitted that Achebe's own stated cultural mission may have encouraged the ethnographic perspective that readers tend to bring to his works.

Kenneth Little (1980) tells us of Achebe's expressed cultural mission:

> As Achebe himself has explained in several places, his opinion is that the African author today has a mission. In addition to resuscitating a sense of pride in Africa's own cultural achievements, it is the writer's duty to educate his African audience. He should help them more readily to understand the nature of Africa's problems and he should also, perhaps suggest ways of solving them (4).

As a didactic author, Achebe wants his readers to perceive the realities and problems of social change in Igbo life. His literary portrayal supports the idea that a writer is to present life as it is; that life is full of happiness and problems; that human weaknesses are implicit in the society and social structure.

Kenneth Little also says that Achebe equivocates in his presentation of Igbo culture, preferring not to provide solutions to problems. Such perceived equivocation, real or imagined, may be due to the fact that a study of Achebe's fiction does not necessarily demonstrate that the author offers solutions to problems. Rather, Achebe describes the changes in the African social order brought about by internal and external forces, weighs the good and the bad that have resulted from those changes, but does not give a decisive answer to which way the scales are tipped when the

changes are weighed. Have the changes in the African social order produced more good than bad? Achebe's responses suggest that the changes have produced mixed results. Some traditional values that had negative social impact have been changed, whereas some modern values which are negative have replaced some positive traditional values.

In dealing with the changes in the African social order, Achebe explicates in his fiction one central concern: the impact of colonization on traditional African values. In fact, his fiction can be said to offer a comprehensive history, albeit a fictional one, of African colonization beginning with native African culture and extending to the contemporary period. Among other things, Achebe focuses on gender roles in Igbo society and the evolution of those roles as the society itself undergoes profound changes. A study of Achebe's perception of the changing gender roles in an African society is of particular importance in this study because, aside from the fact that gender issues have become an important concern generally for literary criticism, a study of gender roles in Achebe's works is essential to any meaningful study of gender roles in African literature. Elaine Showalter (1986), the renowned feminist critic, has noted that

> gender has changed the shape of literary conversation . . . . In the wake of feminist criticism, gender has become recognized as 'a crucial determinant in the production, circulation, and consumption of literary discourse.' You can't discuss Donne or Bryon, the Elizabethan stage or the modernist poem, the files of F. W. Murnau or *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, without talking about gender (1).

As the most often read African author, how Achebe has presented gender roles in his fiction would clearly be a part of the literary conversation on gender roles in literature in general, and in African literature in particular. However, Achebe's perspective cannot be seen as a 'universal perspective', nor should it be expected to be one, because his sense experience is shaped by the Igbo society -- a society with its own systems of values and established practices of male-female relationships and responsibilities.

Social values in Igbo society, as in many other societies, promote the idea that some roles are masculine and others feminine. It is this kind of division of gender roles that influences Achebe's depiction of women's roles in his fiction, and the division is expressed both on a literal level in the action of the plot, and on a symbolic level in

the commentaries of the narrator and the characters. Discussions of gender roles in pre-colonial and colonial Africa are generally permeated by the notion of gender inequality. Most critics generally assume that gender division of roles necessarily equates with gender inequality. For example, Esther Smith (1986) observes that

> Studies of inequality in colonial Africa rarely focus on status of women. Studies of women in African literature rarely focus on the colonial period, and when they do, tend to show either strong mother figures in traditional society, or rootless young women pursuing individualistic and materialistic goals in modern society. Reductionist reflections of monolithic or dualistic images of women in African literature, however, shatter to pieces with the press of data from the vast and diverse body of African literature (27).

However, as Filomina Steady (1987) notes about pre-colonial African society, the gender division is "essentially along parallel, rather than hierarchical, lines, and in general it gives equal value to both male and female" (7). This means that while gender roles in pre-colonial African society are well defined, they are not hierarchical in that both genders are seen as essential to the social order. Each gender has

different, but equally important, role or roles ascribed to it by society.

In studying gender roles in Achebe's fiction, one issue that merits investigation is Achebe's use of locale, particularly the counterpoint Achebe sets up between rural and city settings. As Little has noted, a useful approach to understanding gender roles in society is to investigate the men and women's roles in cities and compare those roles to those of rural settings because "it is the city that provides the best guide to current social attitudes and trends" (2). Little also rightly observes that Achebe does not begin his literary efforts by depicting the city; rather, he begins by portraying life in the village, as in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964). Later in *A Man of the People* (1966), Achebe satirizes Nigerian society by focusing on larger political realities than the village.

Similarly, Victor Uchendu (1965) has suggested that the changes in Igbo society which were a result of colonization have actually highlighted the importance of village values in the African moral perspective. He says,

> Some people still regard the village environment as the best one for the upbringing of youth, especially adolescent girls. This tends to create

> intergenerational conflict: the young people want to live in cities and their parents try to restrain them until they are "properly socialized" in the village (56).

Uchendu, like Achebe, recognizes the "intergenerational conflict" created when the values between city and village life are in conflict. A question that Uchendu raises by qualifying the phrase *'properly socialized'* with quotation marks is the value of village socialization. In other words, is the village the best place to properly socialize men and women in the traditional values of their society? In the case of Achebe's fiction, this question must be answered in the affirmative.

Achebe explores this question by shifting the locale of some of his later works from the village to the city, and by doing so, poses a dilemma for the reader. He shows that women, when transplanted to the city, cannot maintain the subservient role they had in village or traditional African culture; but at the same time, he recognizes that women must maintain their roles as nurturers because such roles, especially in the family, are central to cultural progress, in Africa or elsewhere. The difficulties of making a transition from traditional African culture to a new African culture that is heavily influenced by European values are

central to Achebe's perceptions of change in Igbo society. Thus, he explores the dilemma of "liberating" women from what often appears to be a subservient role -- the legitimate role of nurturing the family -- while at the same time maintaining African culture in the face of a European system of values that promotes power and materialism.

The dilemma that Achebe poses is complex because he recognizes the positive value associated with power and material prosperity while at the same time glorifying village values. The economic problems associated with colonial rule in Africa are, indeed, significant, as Benedict Njoku (1984) points out:

> The arrival of colonial rule exposed Africans to better organized traditional markets with overwhelming competition, but only a privileged few could benefit from such competition. The foreign tendency to development in the twentieth century virtually disregarded the interests of the women in agriculture. Even the post-colonial trade disregards and overrides the women's major economic initiatives. The assumption is that the policy makers of the post-colonial period have continued to ignore the basic problems of African women in agriculture (75).

Although Achebe clearly points out the problems of cultural transition under colonization, he does not provide complete answers to the dilemma of changing cultural values. Part of the vision he presents includes the necessity of African women as independent nurturers. The terms *independent nurturers* can be problematic, however. While on one level independence appears to be a contradiction to the role of a nurturer, in reality independence is the necessary condition for true nurturing.

The role of a nurturer is independent because the nurturer has authority and power. Indeed, Achebe suggests that women have power to nurture when they have power to control. However, colonization is a cause for a rift between the genders, and a rift between traditional and modern values about women's role in society. The rift between the genders, and the consequent rift in cultural values, is the net result of a culture torn between women's traditional roles as nurturers and their modern roles as nurturers, perhaps more so as independent nurturers.

Achebe highlights the importance of women's roles as nurturers by showing that men depend upon women, not only for the establishment of family (and sexual gratification) but for women's resourcefulness as strategists who have insight into the use of power in society. Achebe highlights

women's capacity for using power and promotes the necessity of men recognizing the unity of male and female roles in the successful operation of the social order. Men cannot maintain trivial notions of gender that did not give women their due rewards as nurturers and expect the social order to remain intact. Men must recognize that not only do women maintain the family but they have the capability of providing insight into how power can be used successfully. Achebe seems to be saying that when women are deprived of their rightful role as co-equals with men in the administration of the social order, they can also use their power to subvert men. Men will not understand this subversion but, ironically, will believe that they are subverting women, by using them as sexual objects for gratification, physical or egotistical, when in fact the men are the ones being "used" by women.

In investigating Achebe's attitude toward women, it is important to note that Igbo culture is based in part on a female principle. Fido notes that historically the Igbos have supported a religious tradition based on the necessity of female deities, such as the Earth Goddess Ala, and that such deities are conspicuous in the Igbo's culture and literature. Fido suggests, however, that Achebe is "concerned with the balance of male and female values in

society" (Davies 224), and writes about gender inequity out of a concern that an imbalance of male and female values is "dangerous to social health" (Davies 224). Fido is correct in acknowledging the influence that female deities have played in the development of Igbo culture, citing Leith-Ross' sociological study to give credence to his position. He is also correct in recognizing that Achebe is not antagonistic to the female gender, but seeks to find a balance between male and female values so that the social order is preserved. Mothers are not mere shadows of fathers. They contribute according to their means to the welfare of their families. Achebe perceives women as full partners with their male counterparts, as equals without any iota of psychological dependency. According to Achebe, women are not related to men as servants to their masters; they both play equal but different roles, thus contributing to family unity. The relationship seems to be a unifying force of partners. Such a relation is rooted in the covenant of love between people living together, sharing their lives together, but playing different roles. They are equally responsible for the success of the family.

Not only are the male and female roles conceived as equal in the social order, but Achebe also demonstrates the necessity of the female role by having Okonkwo, in *Things*

*Fall Apart* (1958), for instance, honor his mother by calling his child of exile -- again an ironic touch -- Nneka: "Mother is Supreme"; Achebe also tells us that "He (Okonkwo) did this out of politeness to his mother's kinsmen" (*TFA* 115). Thus, the nurturing Mother Africa bears female children who cause men to respect mothers and who themselves become nurturers.

Balancing equality between the sexes becomes, however, very fragile when Western culture intervenes in African culture, since Western notions of male and female values are contrary to African traditions. In Western culture, men are given a position of authority over women, whereas in African culture men derive their position in relation to fertile women. This difference takes on an added dimension when it is associated with religion. While traditional Igbo society is based on goddess worship, as Elaine Fido (1990) points out, Western culture is based on Christianity, which prohibits any worship other than that of the one true God, traditionally conceived as a male God. Achebe weaves this conflict into his works, particularly when the conversion of a character has dramatic implications for the survival of traditional culture, which in Christian terms is pagan. In short, the mother becomes a central figure in Achebe's works, and the mother's relationships with her children are

significant because those personal relationships are indicators of the direction of unity or weakness in Igbo society.

In particular, Achebe explores the poignancy of women's power when he depicts gender roles in relation to the rearing of children. In Igbo society, both boys and girls seek comfort from their mothers in fearful or stressful moments, but otherwise the boys are systematically divorced from such association with their mothers. On the other hand, a very regimented program for the girls' development is outlined in tasks, festivities, and rites of passage. So important is motherhood in African society, according to MaAdoo and Were (1987), that "motherhood provides the basic self-identity" of African women, and this despite "Western influence and modernization" (136).

Discussing the role of women in Igbo society, Nancy Tanner (1974) notes that:

> The basic structural unit of this patrilineal society -- the residential, economic, and socialization unit -- is that of a woman and her children. On the cultural level, there is no doubt that this is a legitimate and expected arrangement. The mother-child tie is strong and persistent and is *supposed* to

> be that way. Igbo patrilineages segment along maternal lines. Competition between co-wives is a matter of course and solidarity among the children of one mother is expected (147).

Tanner's comments are also relevant to what Achebe has presented to his readers. Before the advent of British colonization, Achebe portrays an Igbo society that is very gender-biased, but with little evidence of women feeling genetically exploited. As colonization progresses, however, his fiction demonstrates that the rearing of privileged girls became over time more and more similar to the rearing of privileged boys, thus creating a special section of the population whose values, perceptions, and interests distinguish them from their fellow citizens.

While Achebe balances the pros and cons of such social changes, Elaine Showalter forcefully supports the liberation of women from such traditional roles because the subordination of women in domestic life was not due to women's unfitness to be a productive part of the larger social order, but was done "in the interest of society, by which was meant the interest of men" (34). This "interest of men" extends to men who write about women. Thus, Showalter says,

> It has been difficult for critics to consider women novelists and women literature theoretically because of their tendency to project and expand their own culture-bound stereotypes of femininity, and to see in women's writing an external opposition of biological and aesthetic creativity (1105).

Showalter's remarks seem to suggest that male authors cannot truly appreciate women's perspectives or write an accurate history of the evolution of gender in any culture, unless that history is limited or related to men. Of course, the problems of writing such a history is immediately apparent when one considers the inextricable gender links between men and women. Perhaps Showalter is really saying that any history of gender roles in a culture, in order to be accurate, must be analyzed from two gender perspectives -- male and female. If that is the case, then a study of Achebe's fictional portrayal of gender roles in Igbo society cannot stand alone as a critical assessment of gender roles in Africa. Such a study, therefore, must be seen as a beginning study, and one that must be supplemented by the fictional works of female African authors and literary critics.

At the same time, it can be said that Achebe's works provide a unique outlook on the evolving role of women in

Igbo society. For example, the meaning of Achebe's Igbo names for his female characters, when translated, have implications for their attitudes toward child rearing and motherhood. That is, in Igbo society, as in many African societies, the name captures the essence of the individual. Also, it is noticeable in his fiction that the female principle such as Anie, goddess of the earth, plays an important role in the life of traditional Igbo society. His fiction, indeed, seems to suggest that traditional Igbo society attempted to strike a balance between the 'male principle' and the 'female principle,' though the attempted balance was not without problems. Achebe's fiction also suggests that for Igbo society to continue to function in the modern world requires new roles for women. Achebe's accounts reveal a strong defense and a strong criticism of women's roles, both in the past and in the present.

As previously mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, the major objective of this study is to explore Achebe's perception of gender roles in Igbo society under the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods. In addition, because Igbo society has been traditionally male-dominated, and because gender roles may have been less favorable to women, it is important to explain the positive as well as the negative aspects of gender roles in Achebe's

fictionalized society, and how the roles have gradually changed under the various epochs of colonialism. The various epochs as presented by Achebe, along with the status and standing of women in Igbo society, will be our focus in the subsequent chapters.

# CHAPTER 2

## Women in Precolonial Igbo Society

The role of women in precolonial Igbo society is well portrayed by Achebe in his first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958). The novel reflects traditional life in Igbo society before the coming of British colonialism, and also the earliest effects of colonialism on the traditional value-system of Igbo society. For the purpose of exploring what roles women performed in precolonial Igbo society, and to what degree the advent of British colonialism had an impact on gender roles in the society, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is therefore the focus of analysis in this chapter.

As a precursor to this analysis, an important question to address concerns women's roles in traditional Igbo society. In an article titled, "The 'Status of Women' in Indigenous African Societies", Niara Sudarkasa (1987) offers the following assessment:

> From my own readings on Africa and my research among the Yoruba in Nigeria and other parts of West Africa, it appears that except for the highly

> Islamized societies in Sub-Saharan Africa, in this part of the world more than any other, in precolonial times women were conspicuous in high places. They were queen-mothers; queen-sisters; princesses; chiefs; and holders of other offices in towns and villages; occasional warriors; and, in one well known case, that of the Lovedu, the supreme monarch. Furthermore, it was almost invariably the case that African women were conspicuous in the economic life of their societies, being involved in farming, trade, or craft production (25).

If we were to judge Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) in the light of Sudarkasa's assessment of women's roles in traditional African societies, it would be obvious that Achebe did not portray his female characters as queen-mothers, queen-sisters, or princesses. Of course as late as the nineteenth century history has recorded in African societies the remarkable achievements of women of power and influence. In Ethiopia, for example, there was Empress Zauditu who took over the rulership of the Ethiopian empire after her father, King Menelik, who ruled Ethiopia between 1889-1899. Also, the mother of Shaka, King of Zulu (1818-1828), was a powerful matriarch who had authority and influence in the affairs of the Zulu (for other numerous

examples of powerful and influential women in traditional African societies, see J.D. Fage, *A History of Africa* (1974)).

Why then, do female characters such as those identified here not feature in Achebe's story? Perhaps the depiction of such female characters was not Achebe's goal in writing *Things Fall Apart* (1958); however, the women he chose to portray in his stories are no less important. The female characters are certainly conspicuous in the economic and spiritual lives of their society. For instance, we find that Okonkwo's wives were farmers and traders, roles which were crucial to the entrepreneurial spirit of the society. Also, the spiritual head of Okonkwo's society, and by implication the society's moral authority, is a female character known as Chielo, the Chief Priestess of Agbala. Citing the work done by Perlman and Moal (1963), *Women in Tropical Africa*, Sudarkasa (1987) also points out that "The purviews of female and male in African societies were often described as separate and complementary" (25), but then goes on to argue that

> Yet, whenever most writers compared the lot of women and men in African, they ascribed to men a better situation, a higher status. Women were depicted as saddled with home and domesticity;

> men were portrayed as enjoying the exhilaration of life in the outside world. For me, the pieces of the portrait did not ring true (25-26).

Sudarkasa's argument about what writers do with the images of African women in their works seems to be a serious indictment of African writers, Achebe himself included. However, as laudable as Sudarkasa's argument is for women in precolonial Africa, the weakness of her argument is her misconception of traditional values in African societies. In traditional African societies, the woman, to borrow the imagery of the English metaphysical poet, John Donne, is the leg of a geometric compass in which the man is the roving arm. The leg symbolizes constancy, and through the constancy of the leg the roving arm is able to complete a perfect circle. For the Igbo society, the constancy of the woman, and indeed the mother, holds the pillar of morality and spirituality for the family in particular and the society at large. As in many other African societies, such as the Yoruba, a mother in Igbo society is considered to be as valuable as gold. She is also Mother Africa, a symbol of supreme motherhood, always accommodating, loving and true, and always conforming to African cultures and traditions. Indeed she is the idealization of Africa unaffected by foreign values or cultures. Therefore, the 'ideal' African

woman is inextricably bound with motherhood "because in many African societies *motherhood defines womanhood*" (Davies 243). As Filomina Steady has also rightly pointed out,

> The most important factor with regard to the woman in traditional society is her role as *mother* and the centrality of this role as a whole. Even in strictly patrilineal societies, women are important as wives and mothers since their reproductive capacity is crucial to the maintenance of the husband's lineage and it is because of women that men can have a patrilineage at all (29).

Motherhood is particularly important in African societies, not only because of the reproductive capacities associated with motherhood, but because motherhood is crucial to the stability and happiness of the traditional African family. Achebe has often been criticized for defending a view of African woman as Mother Africa. The criticism is generally based on the notion that childbearing is not essential for a woman to be fulfilled and happy. While it is true that not all women need to bear children and also be nurturing mothers to find fulfillment, Achebe presents the traditional Igbo value based on the assumption that society depends on the nurturing mother if things are not to fall apart. The

point is not that individual women should not be given the opportunities to "compete" with men, but that on literal and symbolic levels, womanhood and motherhood are important in a traditional Igbo society. Both elements form the essence of family values in Igbo society. It is this understanding that leads Achebe to idealize women as 'Mother Africa', although such idealization does not negate the individual struggles of particular women and the pains that many women might have endured.

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) provides an important picture of the Igbo society toward the end of the nineteenth century. It also presents a direct, self-conscious representation of the dynamics of gender interaction in Umuofia, an Igbo society in the full vigor of a traditional way of life. He explores his concern and interest by constantly questioning, testing, and undermining cliches and stereotypes. Because Achebe is interested in the classification of gender, through Okonkwo's family he observes that while children are young in the Igbo community, parents fulfill their duties to them: disciplining the children, fostering cultural rules, and promoting economic behavior. The main character, Okonkwo, works hard, protects and rules his family because when growing up he already learned not to become lazy and

unproductive like his father; hence, he accepts the established norms and standards of his community for success in the form of providing for his household, and working hard to be a successful farmer. In Okonkwo's society gender roles are related to civic duties. Men and women are defined by their roles to the community. A man is expected to provide for his family, and any man who does not is defined as a woman. Thus, any person -- whether man or woman -- is given a gender role based on the individual's social responsibilities.

The method of assigning gender roles in Okonkwo's society may seem rather strange; but on a deeper level of analysis, we find that it is, on the contrary, very simple and practical. Gender roles in traditional Igbo society may be said to fall into four categories. Under the first, a person is a man because he performs the roles that the community has assigned to a man. Under the second category, a woman is also a woman because she performs the roles assigned to her by the community. The third category assumes that if any individual performs the roles conventionally assigned to a woman, then the individual is a woman, regardless of the individual's biological gender. The fourth category, like the third, also assumes that if any individual performs the roles conventionally assigned to

a man, then the individual must be a man, regardless of biological gender.

In Okonkwo's society, the first two categories of roles are more widespread than the last two. Most of the family relationships presented to us in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) exemplify the first two categories of relationships. The last two categories, on the other hand, are clearly unorthodox and do not have that many family relationships that illustrate them. All of the categories of roles relationships identified here, with the exception of the third, entail not only doing what is socially acceptable, but doing it well. The third category carries negative connotations such as a sense of inadequacy or worthlessness.

Critics frequently suggest that Okonkwo, the central character in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and the protagonist of precolonial Igbo society, is doubly motivated to want to achieve greatness in his society because of his father's failure. Unoka, Okonkwo's father, had not succeeded in achieving any kind of status in the tribe by the usual means of wealth or title (Carroll 36). Unoka is, therefore, a perfect example of an Igbo individual who falls into the third category of role-relationships in Igbo society, since he has refused the roles that the tribe has assigned to his biological gender, and chosen instead to perform roles more

characteristic of the female gender. Consequently, Achebe paints a very pathetic image of this character:

> . . . Unoka was, of course a debtor, and he owed every neighbour some money, from a few cowries to quite substantial amounts.
>
> He was tall but very thin and had a slight stoop. He wore a haggard and mournful look except when he was drinking or playing on his flute (TFA 4).

Clearly Unoka's forte is music; and he appears to have demonstrated some appreciable skills in the playing of his flute. However, he did not play his flute because he saw it as a means of redeeming himself and creating a respectable profession for himself. Unoka played his flute more for the free lunches the instrument accorded him, rather than for his own vocational edification. Achebe tells us that

> He was very good on his flute, and his happiest moments were the two or three moons after the harvest . . . . Unoka loved the good fare and the good fellowship, and he loved this season of the year, when the rains had stopped and the sun rose every morning with dazzling beauty (TFA 4).

An important fact of Igbo society is that a son is not measured by his father's success or lack of it. As Carroll notes, "the tolerance and openness of Igbo society enables

the individual with drive and ability to succeed . . . a man was judged according to his worth, and not according to the worth of his father" (Carroll 37). Okonkwo, as it would be expected in a society that values achievement or status, rejects his father's weakness and poverty, and struggles to affirm his own masculinity in a traditional society. The affirmation of maleness, as Okonkwo sees it, includes the subjugation of the family. As Carole Davies (1986) notes, "Okonkwo rules his compound with a heavy hand, beating his wives, repressing all his emotion, except anger; refusing to show tenderness to his children" (243-44). Okonkwo's use of brutality enforces the division of gender roles. For Okonkwo, a man's role, then, is not only to protect and provide for his family, but to ensure that his family bows to any use of force associated with that protection and provision.

This type of role definition has significant implications for child rearing also. Force and toughness are associated with the rearing of males, whereas submission and conformity are expected from females because the latter are assumed to be weaker. Concomitantly, boys are given more privileges than girls, so equality of gender during the child-rearing period is denied. Males are reared to become future heads of their families and the community, and to

become successful and self-reliant. Although both young boys and girls are allowed to seek comfort from their mothers in fearful or stressful moments, boys are gradually and systematically divorced from their mothers. Girls are trained using a very regimented program that includes tasks, festivities, and rites of passage. A female's place is in the kitchen, to serve the parents, to marry, and to have children. Carole Davis (1990) has also noted that females have fewer choices than males in terms of what they can do in life and "Lack of choices for young females enforces silence" (242). Thus, as children grow together, they hear the same stories of socialization from their mothers; the males are taught to be analytical, decisive, courageous, aggressive, competitive, strong, and influential; females, on the other hand, are taught not to seek a controlling influence over their husbands and children, nor to be strongly proactive in the governance of family affairs. These gender differences are deeply planted and nurtured by parents of both genders.

Marriage relationships in precolonial Igbo society are based partly on mutual respect, and partly on status. One example of respect linked with status is the relationship between Anasi and Okonkwo on one hand, and between Anasi and Okonkwo's other wives. When Okonkwo is visiting Nwakaibie,

Anasi, the first wife, is away from home. But Anasi must return to taste Okonkwo's wine before the other wives can drink from the wine. Anasi, a middle-aged woman, tall and strongly built, has authority in her bearing and looks every inch the ruler of the womenfolk in a large and prosperous family. She wears the anklet of her husband's titles, which the first wife alone would wear. When she returns, she walks up to Okonkwo and accepts the horn from him. She then goes down on one knee, drinks a little, and hands him back the horn. She rises, calls him by his name, and goes back to her hut. The other wives drink in the same way in their proper order and go away (*TFA* 14-15).

This episode illustrates two Igbo customs, namely the preeminent position of the first wife in the family and the tradition of mutual respect between husbands and wives. A husband may forfeit his respect and title if he mistreats his wife in public, or beats her during the peaceful season of the year, or hurts her while she is pregnant so that the fetus, "her fruit," is aborted prematurely. The husband can be disciplined by the elders and the in-laws. He can be charged by the native court according to the society's civil laws. Lack of this respect, codified in law by penalties associated with unjust wife beating, brings disgrace to the husband and punishment by the head of the village. Wives

unite against the husband if one of them is beaten without a just cause. For example, when Ojiugo, Okonkwo's third wife, goes to plait her hair and is therefore unavailable to answer her husband's call, Okonkwo is galled:

> "Where is Ojiugo?" he asked his second wife, who came out of her hut to draw water from a gigantic pot in the shade of a small tree in the middle of the compound.
>
> "She had gone to plait her hair."
>
> Okonkwo bit his lips as anger welled up within him.
>
> "Where are her children. Did she take them?" he asked with unusual coolness and restraint.
>
> "They are not here," answered his first wife, Nwoye's mother.
>
> Okonkwo bent down and looked into her hut. Ojiugo's children were eating with the children of his first wife.
>
> "Did she ask you to feed them before she went?"
>
> "Yes," lied Nwoye's mother trying to minimize Ojuigo's thoughtlessness (TFA 15, 20-21).

When Ojiugo returns, Okonkwo beats her brutally. In his careless anger he had forgotten that it was the Week of Peace. Okonkwo's first two wives run out terrified and in

great alarm, pleading with him to stop beating Ojiugo because it is the Week of Peace, but Okonkwo pays no heed. His punishment for such a sacrilege is swift and drastic, as Ezeani, the priest of the earth goddess says, in chastening Okonkwo:

> "Listen to me,--- You are not a stranger to Umuofia. You know as well as I do that our forefathers ordained that before we plant any crops in the earth we should observe weeks in which a man does not say a harsh word to his neighbor. We live in peace with our fellows to honor our great goddess of the earth without whose blessing our crops will not grow. You have committed a great evil" (*TFA* 21-22).

Achebe is being ironic here. By beating his wife during the week of peace Okonkwo also beats himself by depriving himself of the fruits of fertility. Okonkwo's actions show him to be a tragic character, propelled by his determination to atone for his father's inaction and 'effeminacy'. Ironically, though, Okonkwo violates tradition to honor tradition. He is trapped by his perceptions of what it means to honor the conventions of masculinity.

He believes, for instance, that wives should be servants to their husbands, as Obierika says:

"It was only this morning," said Obierika, "that Okonkwo and I were talking about Abame and Aninta where titled men climb trees and pound foo-foo for their wives. All their customs are upside-down. They do not decide bride-price as we do with sticks. They haggle and bargain as if they were buying a goat or a cow in the market." (*TFA* 51)

To such a husband-wife relationship Okonkwo responds with great pessimism: 'The world is large," said Okonkwo. "I have even heard that in some tribes a man's children belong to his wife and her family" (*TFA* 51). At another time, Okonkwo shows his disrespect for his wives, "'Do what you are told, woman,' Okonkwo thundered, and stammered [to Nwoye's mother]. 'When did you become one of the ndiche (old people or ancients) of Umuofia?'" (*TFA* 10-11). Okonkwo appears to fail miserably in his role as husband. He rules his household like a tyrant with an iron hand. Lacking any sense of proportion or compromise, he ignores or cannot accept the wisdom of respecting a 'mother' as demanded by traditional African culture and encapsulated in powerful imagery such as 'Mother is Gold'.

Another way that gender differences typify *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is seen in male bonding. Achebe gives an example of this in the relationship between Ikemefuna and

Nwoye. Ikemefuna becomes a role model for the younger Nwoye, and from the time they meet, Nwoye is attracted to Ikemefuna because Ikemefuna makes Nwoye "feel grown up." As a result of feeling grown up, Nwoye does not spend time in his mother's hut while she is cooking but stays close to his father, sitting in his obi or watching him prepare wine. Achebe says,

> Nothing pleased Nwoye now more than to be sent for by his mother or another of his father's wives to do one of those difficult and masculine tasks in the home, like splitting wood or pounding food. On receiving such a message through a younger brother or sister, Nwoye would feign annoyance and grumble aloud about women and their troubles (*TFA* 37).

In learning his role as a man, Nwoye learns to associate himself with male values: toughness, the strength needed to split wood or pound food. Evidently, the boundaries for toughness are not limited to performing the tasks needed to help the family survive physically, but include brutality to family members so they can survive in the culture, and presumably be successful financially. This brutality is fostered by Okonkwo each time he encouraged the boys "to sit in his obi, and he told them stories of the land, mostly masculine stories of violence and bloodshed" (TFA 9-11,108).

The display of male prowess, however, must be clothed in gruffness; thus, Nwoye feigns annoyance and grumbles aloud. Ironically, he grumbles about the very thing that provides the opportunity for him to show his maleness: "women and their troubles." This should be read as a deep irony, not only of Nwoye's frankness in understanding what he is doing but in his misunderstanding of the ground of his masculinity. Achebe seems to be saying that Nwoye's survival as a male depends upon the needs of females. Their troubles become his opportunities, though one should read "troubles" as meaning the troubles women have *because* they must serve as the ground of maleness while being denied the satisfaction of being honored for their position. Rather, men consider women as "trouble." In reality, though, the women are the ones who have to suffer because of the troubled view of maleness perpetuated by the traditional culture, and conveniently interpreted by men to favor their status and enhance their power to control.

Okonkwo promotes this troubling view of maleness, supporting Nwoye in his aspirations to be masculine, especially when that aspiration is realized in the control of women. Achebe pictures Okonkwo as wanting "Nwoye to grow into a tough young man capable of ruling his father's household when he was dead and gone to join the ancestors"

(TFA 37). Here the concept of maleness is further supported by a religion based on ancestor worship. The religious element undergirding maleness justifies the trouble women must endure and makes changes in the cultural practices more difficult than they would be otherwise. Naturally, Okonkwo is pleased when Nwoye shows that he will "be able to control his women folk" because if Nwoye cannot rule his family "(and especially his women) he was not really a man" (TFA 37). Okonkwo goes on to link a man's rule of his family with his ability to provide for his family. A man who could not rule his family "was like the man in the song who had ten and one wives, and not enough soup for his foo-foo" (TFA 37). Male gender has come full circle. A man must provide for his family, but he cannot provide for his family if he will not rule his family. This is so because women, as Umuofia men frequently assume, are inherently troublesome and must be controlled. This assumption, with its brutal social realities, is a fact of traditional Igbo culture that Achebe dispassionately reflects.

The extreme position that Okonkwo represents concerning the inculcation of gender roles is in large part a reaction to his father's effeminacy. In order to exorcise himself from any curse that he might have inherited from his father for the father's abominable choice of female roles, roles

that he did not even perform creditably, Okonkwo goes to extremities to ensure his own redemption. And just as a pendulum swings from one extreme to another, so does Okonkwo; and his extreme positions require a correction that, structurally, his son, Nwoye, offers.

Although he recognizes the benefit of masculinity as preached by his father, Nwoye still prefers the stories his mother tells him.

> Nwoye knew that it was right to be masculine and to be violent, but somehow he still preferred the stories that his mother used to tell, and which she no doubt still told her younger children -- stories of the tortoise and his wily ways, and of the bird *eneke-nti-oba* . . . (TFA 37).

The story that Nwoye likes best is about the quarrel between Earth and Sky that creates a drought. The Vulture pleads with the Sky to send rain, singing a song "of the suffering of men" to soften Sky's heart (Sky is masculine); and "At last Sky was moved to pity, and he gave to Vulture rain wrapped in leaves of coco-yam" (38). Of this story, Achebe tells the reader,

> That was the kind of story that Nwoye loved. But he now knew that they were for foolish women and children, and he knew that his father

> wanted him to be a man. And so he feigned that he no longer cared for women's stories. And when he did this he saw that his father was pleased, and no longer rebuked him or beat him (TFA 38-39).

Carole Davies (1990) is right in her evaluation of Nwoye's survival strategy. She observes that "Nwoye only puts on the veneer of manhood to please his father. Nwoye actually prefers his mother's stories to the masculine stories of wars and prowess" (246). But the Igbo society of the time is not ready for people like Nwoye who might wish to confront head-on the gender prejudices of their society. Indeed, Nwoye understood this perfectly; and rather than verbalize his frustration about gender prejudices, he is content to wear a social mask.

The symbolism in the Earth-Sky story is also of particular relevance to the subject of role delineation in precolonial Igbo society. The earth represents "the goddess Ani, the source of all fertility, and the sky is a god, protecting the sky and air" (Innes and Lidfors 128-29). The story tells us that the Sky was moved to pity because the Vulture sang about "the suffering of the sons of men." In response, Sky sends rain so that men can be reproduced; and also that women can be fertile and produce families for men

to protect. Infertility becomes a communal problem. But it is a problem because of "the suffering of the sons of men," not the daughters of men (or Eve). Fertility takes on an instrumental role that undercuts the need for women as anything other than conduits for the birth of leaders -- boys; and their obedient followers -- girls.

Okonkwo's approach to child-rearing continually makes the distinction between boys and girls, and between men and women, sacrificing the integrity of the one for the integrity of the other. That is, Okonkwo belittles the female role to highlight the superiority of the male role. This negative instruction in child rearing can be seen when Okonkwo is teaching Nwoye and Ikemefuna how to plant yams. After the Week of Peace every man and his family begins to clear the bush to make new farms. They cut, dry, and burn the bush. As the smoke rises, children love to watch the kites appear and hover in all directions in the sky. Okonkwo prepares for farming; Nwoye (his eldest son) and Ikemefuna (the surrogate son) help him to fetch the yams from baskets and to count the seeds in groups of four hundred. Sometimes Okonkwo tests his boys by giving them a few yams to prepare. He says with much threatening:

> "Do you think you are cutting up yams for cooking?" he asked Nwoye. "If you split another yam of this size, I

> shall break your jaw. You think you are still a child. I began to own a farm at your age. And you," he said to Ikemefuna, "do you not grow yams where you come from?" (TFA 33-34).

In expressing his dissatisfaction with the efforts of Nwoye and Ikemefuna, Okonkwo compares unacceptable efforts in preparing the yams with cooking (a woman's task), with being a child, and with being unaware of tradition as when Okonkwo questions Ikemefuna's knowledge of how to prepare yams for planting. Okonkwo teaches through negative examples that have been culturally formed.

Even at the risk of endangering life, Okonkwo is so obsessed with achievement and greatness that he would urge male children to perform difficult tasks, especially if such tasks help to prove their manhood. Achebe tells us in the following passage what Okonkwo thinks about boys and achievement:

> Inwardly, he knew that the boys were still too young to understand fully the difficult art of preparing seed-yams. But he thought that one could not begin too early. Yam stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a great man indeed (TFA 23).

Agricultural production, maleness, and the favor of the gods are interlinked since the gods provide agricultural increase, including human fertility. Thus, the father must provide for the family, must find favor with the deities. That favor is passed on to the children by skills the father teaches. Naturally, the primary role of the father as the transmitter of values essential for achievement and greatness invests the father with authority. In Okonkwo's family, the authority of the father is not to be questioned. The father is to protect and rear children, especially the boys, along the line of tradition suitable for the society. The father concentrates on rearing the boys for strength, valor, honor and greatness.

At the same time, a male can be sacrificed, literally, if the oracles, who by their very nature are related to economic prosperity, demand death to promote the life of the community. The irony here is made complex because the particular sacrifice Achebe pictures -- that of Ikemefuna -- is central to Nwoye's ability, and consequent decision, to question the validity of the Igbo concept of maleness. The sacrifice of Ikemefuna is important to the thematic development of gender in *Things Fall Apart*, so it is important for us to explore the incident of the sacrifice carefully.

The news of the sacrifice is announced to Okonkwo in the following passage.

> Okonkwo sat in his obi crunching happily with Ikemefuna and Nwoye, and drinking palm-wine copiously, when Ogbuefi Ezeudu came in. Ezeudu was the oldest man in this quarter of Umuofia. He had been a great and fearless warrior in his time, and was now accorded great respect in all the clan (TFA 40).

Excusing Okonkwo from the company of the two boys, Ezeudu tells Okonkwo that Ikemefuna will be sacrificed because the "Oracle of the Hills and the Caves had pronounced it" (40). Ezeudu also tells Okonkwo, "But I want you to have nothing to do with it. He calls you father" (40). In effect, Ezeudu acknowledges that male sacrifice is essential for the well being of the community. This fact is based on divine revelation. If it is the case that Igbo society prizes maleness, then it is little wonder that the gods will want the society to sacrifice its most prized possessions to them. Even maleness, the epitome of social standing in traditional Igbo society, must bow to divine edict.

But one of the most interesting revelations about the sacrifice seems to be the encounter between Ezeudu and Okonkwo. Achebe presents another face of Igbo culture in

Ezeudu. Being the oldest man in the clan, he probably represents the older and gentler version of Igbo culture. He also demonstrates, through his admonitions to Okonkwo requesting the latter not to participate in the killing of Ikemefuna, that everyone in precolonial Igboland is not as straight-jacketed and obsessive as Okonkwo about tradition. Having fought in so many wars, Ezeudu is a man of great achievement in his own right, but he does not come across in the story as bullish and inflexible as Okonkwo. The latter's inflexibility in the sacrifice of Ikemefuna, a boy who grew up in his household, leads us to also question his understanding of gender roles in Igbo society. In other words, people like Okonkwo are not necessarily the standard for the treatment of women in Igbo society. Such individuals may have carried the division of gender roles into extremities and their consequent absurdities.

In addition, Okonkwo's participation in the sacrifice of Ikemefuna also raises other important questions: Is Okonkwo trying to play God by taking the life of a human? Does he think it is the duty of his gender to carry out punishments meted out by the gods, even if it means killing a child? Does Okonkwo assume that his inviolability is a mark of his maleness? Although it is true the gods demanded Ikemefuna's sacrifice, they did not, however, require the

participation of his father (custodial or surrogate) in the sacrifice. The father cannot act as both a leader of the community and the sacrificer of his son, even when that son is one by association, not blood. So important is the bond between father and son, even surrogate son, that the father must not participate in the sacrifice of the son less social cohesion -- the transference of maleness through instruction -- be rent and rendered powerless. The authority of the father to perpetuate custom must not be compromised by the association of the father with the death of sonship.

The situation is reminiscent of the Abraham-Isaac sacrifice, in which Jehovah intervenes so that Abraham is not in the precarious position of disposing of the promised heir. Ironically, Ikemefuna's death is spoken of euphemistically as "going home." This is not merely a convenient fiction. Instead, Ikemefuna's sacrifice is designed to establish the stability of the home by the supreme sacrifice of maleness. Ikemefuna goes home in the sense that he becomes the honored son. He is the boy who "lived with him [Okonkwo] for three years and called him father" (41). The sacrifice of Ikemefuna, in a bizarre manner, benefits Okonkwo because it proves beyond any shadow of doubt the pride that Okonkwo would derive from his show of toughness.

Surprisingly, however, we are told that Okonkwo shivers whenever he remembers how he killed a boy who called him father. He becomes restless, shaky, and sleepless. In a soliloquy, he thinks aloud, saying:

> "When did you become a shivering old woman?" Okonkwo asks himself, "You who are known in all the nine villages for your valour in war? How can a man who has killed five men in battle fall to pieces because he has added a boy to their number? Okonkwo, you have become a woman indeed" (TFA 45).

Okonkwo does not perceive himself as a cruel and destructive father since he has accumulated material wealth, honor, and respect for his family and community in the traditional manner. As head of the family, he is ruled by passion and hate. He has only one aim in life -- to succeed, but to succeed in terms of warfare, wealth and status.

Ikemefuna's sacrifice, ironically, also serves to undermine maleness in Okonkwo's society, particularly in Nwoye's case. The irony has also been alluded to by G.D. Killam (1969) in his remarks that Nwoye is "a source of grave concern to Okonkwo because he shows all the signs of possessing the 'female' disposition of his grandfather and thrives under the influence of Ikemefuna" (21). Therefore, the death of Ikemefuna deprives Nwoye of the male role model

that he so desperately needed, for Okonkwo could never be a role model for Nwoye. Deprived of the perfect role model, Nwoye begins to question and ultimately reject the Igbo perception of maleness; after all his mother, and other women in the society, do not participate in the abominable male role that his father craves and relishes. The rejection begins when Nwoye is returning from the farm and hears an infant crying:

> A sudden hush had fallen on the women, who had been talking, and they had quickened their steps . . . . A vague chill had descended on him and his head had seemed to swell, like a solitary walker at night who passes an evil spirit on the way. Then something had given way inside him. It had descended on him again, this feeling, when his father walked in, that night after killing Ikemefuna (TFA 43).

Nwoye, who is described as "having too much of his mother's character, begins to internalize many female values," (TFA 106) and in his ideas he reflects on some of the excesses of his society and his own father's pre-occupation with masculine achievements. In his search for an alternative, he becomes first in his family to join the Christian church (*TFA* 106). Nwoye denounces his father's

household to join the Christian group where he can be at peace with himself.

In gender rearing, ironically, Okonkwo has better luck with his daughters, particularly Ezinma whom he wishes to be a boy, and to take over his obi when he returns to his ancestors.

> "Sit like a woman!" Okonkwo shouted at her.
>
> Ezinma brought her two legs together and stretched them in front of her.
>
> "Father, will you go to see the wrestling?" Ezinma asked after a suitable interval.
>
> "Yes," and after a pause she said, "Can I bring a chair for you?"
>
> "No, that is a boy's job" (TFA 32).

In Okonkwo's relationship with his daughter, Ezinma, Okonkwo -- like the traditional Igbo culture itself -- is always tormented by the pangs of contradiction. On one level, he wants Ezinma to behave like a girl, but sometimes he also wishes her to be a boy. As Carole Davies (1990) also notes, Okonkwo "constantly reminds Ezinma to sit like a woman. Yet he repeats over and over again that she should have been a boy" (246-47). Davies thinks the daughter-father relationship helps to emphasize Achebe's position that gender ought not to be a barrier to excellence or

achievement. Ezinma is a bright and articulate young girl, possessing all the credentials, except masculinity, for success and leadership (247). In contrast, there is another woman in Okonkwo's world who does not have to change her gender in order to be successful. The woman is Chielo, the chief priestess of Agbala, a spirit god. As the spiritual head of Umuofia, she has no doubt achieved greatness. Of course, this type of greatness is probably meaningless to a person like Okonkwo. For a man of his kind, greatness has to be material and male-oriented.

Achebe balances his characterization of Okonkwo as a tyrant motivated by worldly materialism by also portraying Okonkwo as a loving father who has a high regard and deep love for his daughter, Ezinma. He struggles to protect Ezinma from dying and to cure her of her illness as an "ogbanje" (TFA 76). Okonkwo's love and care for Ezinma, a daughter who is as resourceful as any son is important because it helps Achebe to demonstrate that maleness, as conceived by the precolonial Igbo society and as illustrated in Okonkwo's relationship with his sons, will not work. Such a view defines maleness in ways that contradict human experience. For instance, Okonkwo contradicts his notion of maleness when he says that Ezinma should have been a boy. His theory of maleness, based as it is upon tradition, is

open to question since he recognizes in his daughter the very traits he associates exclusively with being a male. He even calls into question religious tradition -- the same tradition that links maleness with economic success and fertility -- when he pleads with Chielo the priestess on behalf of Ezinma. Chielo's response shows just how serious Okonkwo's rebuff of her is:

> "The priestess suddenly screamed. 'Beware, Okonkwo!' she warned. 'Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a man speak when a god speaks? Beware!'" (TFA 70-71).

Okonkwo's willingness to challenge religious authority to "save" his daughter reveals an underlying tension in Okonkwo's thinking about maleness. Achebe creates that tension to offer hope of uniting the diverse gender roles. At the same time, Achebe acknowledges the fact that Okonkwo rises and falls for the clan, and by extension the African traditional society, at that historical moment when British colonialism appeared on the horizon. Through Okonkwo's death, Achebe seems to suggest that for survival and for safe passage into the future the traditional African society must learn to harness both the male and female qualities of its citizens, and that sexual prejudices must give way to equal opportunities for the sexes (TFA 246).

The mother-child relationship in *Things Fall Apart* provides yet another level of analysis from which we can examine gender roles in precolonial Igbo society. In the African world view which Achebe examines, the sons have a special relationship with their fathers while the daughters have the same relationship with their mothers. Okonkwo had under his 'protective wings' two young sons, Nwoye, his son by his first wife, and Ikemefuma, a boy of fifteen, who lived in his household for three years. As culture and tradition have it, Nwoye's mother, as the first wife, took maternal care of Ikemefuma. The latter, on the other hand, has a major influence on Nwoye, partly because he transfers maternal values to Nwoye. This transfer of values becomes evident when Nwoye recognizes the struggle of choosing between his father's values or his mother's values. As already noted above, Igbo sons are told stories of the land -- usually masculine stories of violence, heroism, and bloodshed. However, Nwoye prefers his mother's stories "which she no doubt still told to her younger children, stories of the tortoise and his wily ways, and of the bird *eneke-nti oba* who challenged the whole world to a wrestling contest and was finally thrown by the cat" (*TFA* 37-38).

Barbara Harlow (1991) explains these stories in terms of liberation "from colonial domination" and links such

domination with another kind of domination -- "restrictive traditionalism." According to Harlow, "The Tortoise tale, told by Ekwefi, one of Okonkwo's four wives, described not only the fate of Tortoise after the great feast but the transformation of the Parrot as well" (74-75). Thus, the stories appear to hint at the need for a changed view of power in traditional Igbo society concerning the mother-child relationship. The mother's nurturing role should not be restricted to daughters only; sons also need such nurturing. Thus, when danger beckons and the atmosphere is grim, Nwoye takes comfort in the serenity of his mother's protective care: "Throughout the day Nwoye sat in his mother's hut and tears stood in his eyes" (*TFA* 41).

Another aspect of that impasse is the difference between African ancient religion and the new Western religion. Igbo culture has been strongly influenced by goddess worship; thus, Mother Africa is not merely a social symbol, but a religious symbol as well. The traditional polytheistic worship of goddesses is in direct violation of Christian monotheism. Achebe highlights the tension between those two religions when Nwoye converts to the Christian religion. Nwoye's conversion is especially important because it is based in part on Nwoye's difficult and unsatisfactory relationship with Okonkwo, a male figure, and

in part on Nwoye's bond with his mother. Nwoye could not stand the domineering personality of his father, but he did relish his mother's kind treatment, which provided a relief to the adversity of his father's treatment. Okonkwo

> wanted Nwoye to grow into a tough young man capable of ruling his father's household when he was dead and gone to join the ancestors. He wanted him to be a prosperous man, having enough in his barn to feed the ancestors with regular sacrifices (*TFA* 37).

But Okonkwo recognizes that Nwoye is too closely allied with his mother for him to become the man Okonkwo envisions: "I have best to make Nwoye grow into a man," Okonkwo says, "but there is too much of his mother in him" (*TFA* 4).

The irony of Nwoye's rejection of maleness is that his mother's support of him leads to a rift with the traditional religion based on goddess worship. The irony becomes even more pronounced when that rift leads to Nwoye's preference for Christianity, a religion based on the worship of a God characterized as male. Perhaps Achebe is saying that Mother Africa leads to Father God, that when men are nurtured by Mother Africa they will find the true father figure, then bringing about a balance between the male and female influences in African society.

At any rate, Nwoye's conversion is a direct result of Nwoye's rejecting his father. In particular, Nwoye is frustrated by the cruel murder of Ikemefuma with whom he felt great affinity. Before the fatal murder, Nwoye agonized over the impending fatality. He sat in his mother's hut and tears stood in his eyes. His mother's sympathy knew no bounds. Okonkwo, however, regrets begetting a son like Nwoye -- degenerate and effeminate. In a moment of frustration, Okonkwo dares his other children to choose between change, symbolized by the new religion, and the Igbo tradition:

> You have all seen the great abomination of your brother. Now he is no longer my son or your brother. I will only have a son who is a man, who will hold his head up among my people. If any one of you prefers to be a woman, let him follow Nwoye now while I am alive so that I can curse him. If you turn against me when I am dead, I will visit you and break your neck (*TFA* 121-22).

By her maternal understanding and enduring sympathy, Nwoye's mother compensates for Okonkwo's harshness. His mother's filial love sustained Nwoye through the turbulent years of his childhood and young adulthood. His mother compassionately pleads with him to achieve his dream of

spiritual conversion from his father's traditional religion to the new religion of Christianity.

Nwoye's mother has the ability to disagree without being disagreeable. In her anonymity she had the audacity to face unpleasantness, to face the odium of a husband tied to an imbalanced view of Igbo traditions, cultures, and mores. She holds the equilibrium in the middle of opposing choices. Thus, when Mr. Kiaga says, "Blessed is he who forsakes his father and his mother for my sake," (TFA 108) he is expressing joy at Nwoye's conversion to a balanced view of Africa. He also says, "Those that hear my words are my father and my mother" (*TFA* 108), officially invoking family ties made possible through the blood of Christ's sacrifice to show the permanence of 'sonship' in a supernatural realm. The irony of forsaking one's earthly family to be united to a heavenly family is tempered by the fact that Nwoye, by loving his earthly mother, gains a heavenly father. His ultimate aim was also to return later to his mother, his brothers and sisters, and convert them to his new religion (*TFA* 108). In other words, the transition of traditional Igbo culture under a new and different influence has begun in earnest.

Much of what has been said focuses on how *Things Fall Apart* (1958) cannot be understood unless one appreciates

Achebe's use of Mother Africa and Father God to reach a balance in the social order. At the same time, Achebe takes into account the necessity of mothers to establish nurturing relationships with their daughters. In *Things Fall Apart* (1958), the relationships between mothers and daughters exhibit maternal, tender love. For familial harmony, the mother lavishes her love on her daughter Ezinma, who prides herself on having a mother with whom she can develop affinity and closeness. In addition, Okonkwo was proud of Ezinma. Of all his children she alone understood his every mood. A bond had grown between them as the year had passed (122). But he never stopped regretting that Ezinma was a girl. Symbolically, however, the contradictions exhibited by Okonkwo also represent the contradictions in traditional Igbo culture, and the tragic death of Okonkwo portends the beginning of the end of 'restrictive traditionalism' for women in Igbo society. It also suggests a sign of hope for a better role appropriation for women in a changing Igbo society, where colonialism is the new master.

# CHAPTER 3

## Women in Colonial Igbo Society

This chapter will examine the status of women in Igbo society during colonial rule. Two of Achebe's novels, *No Longer At Ease* (1960) and *Arrow of God* (1964), portray Igbo society under colonial rule, hence both provide the material for this analysis. In these novels the appropriation of gender roles takes place in two locales - the city, where the workings of the colonial justice system are dramatized; and in the village, where colonial institutions run into conflict with traditional life.

It is important to recognize that Achebe is dealing with a tension resulting from an assault on the traditional Igbo culture by an encroaching 'modernity'. As Simon Gikandi (1991), rightly indicates, "He (Achebe) emphasizes the strains and distortions within this culture and, more important, its transformations under colonial occupation" (29). The transformations, initiated by colonialism and which also had wider implications for the Nigerian society, raise issues about the traditional roles of family members under the overarching influence of a foreign culture. For

instance, in traditional Igbo societies, as indicated in the previous chapter, women had a particular role in the rearing of children. They were expected to nurture children, especially female children, so that the female children would become nurturing mothers. Women also served as role models for female children who would one day take up the nurturing of a future generation. The pertinent questions for us in this chapter are whether these roles are modified under the colonial administration.

Achebe's *No Longer At Ease* (1960), a sequel to his *Things Fall Apart* (1958), is set in two locales -- the city of Lagos and the village of Umuofia -- for the purpose of presenting the two faces of the conflict between traditional values and the colonial ethos. Obi, the protagonist of *No Longer At Ease* and the grandson of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, presents an interesting historical connection to the sociological struggles began by Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*.

As the story of *No Longer At Ease* unfolds, the reader is presented with a man's world, a world peopled by male judges, male prosecutors, male witnesses, male commentators, and a male defendant. Describing the crowd who had gathered in the Crown court room to watch Obi's trial for bribery and corruption, Achebe writes,

> 'This court begins at nine o'clock. Why are you late?' Whenever Mr Justice William Galloway, Judge of the High Court of Lagos and the Southern Cameroons, looked at a victim he fixed him with his gaze as a collector fixes his insect with formalin. He lowered his head like a charging ram and looked over his gold-rimmed spectacles at the lawyer. 'I am sorry, Your Honour,' the man stammered. 'My car broke down on the way.' . . . . Every available space in the court room was taken up. There were almost as many people standing as sitting. The case had been the talk of Lagos for a number of weeks and on this last day anyone who could possibly leave his job was there to hear the judgement (NLA 1).

Just as women in the pre-colonial Igbo society of *Things Fall Apart* (1958) have been inconspicuous in the public affairs of Umuofia, especially at public gatherings, we find no mention of women, participants or observers, in the court room description. The women are lost in the anonymity of "many people." However, it would be unfair to censure Achebe for making women invisible in his court room description. Unless women characters are actually relevant to the court proceedings, any attempt by Achebe to introduce them would be contrived and gratuitous.

Interestingly, however, two women who are very important in the protagonist's life -- the protagonist's mother and his estranged girl-friend -- are reported absent in the court room in the following passage:

> In fact, some weeks ago when the trial first began, Mr. Green, his boss, who was one of the Crown witnesses has also said something about a young man of great promise. And Obi had remained completely unmoved. Mercifully he had recently lost his mother, and Clara had gone out of his life. The two events following closely on each other had dulled his sensibility and left him a different man, able to look words like 'education' and 'promise' squarely in the face . . . (NLA 2).

Achebe's portrayal above is significant in the context of gender roles and gender relationships in the novel. The absence of Obi's mother and his girl-friend, Clara, at the time of his trial seems to symbolize the emptiness in Obi's life. Without the women, Obi has become a changed person whose sensibilities have also become dulled. Generalizing a little further, it is possible to see the emptiness of Obi's life as the emptiness of his society. Achebe seems to be implying that a society that ignores its women, or its life-givers and nurturers, is destined to the fate that Obi

suffers in *No Longer At Ease* -- that is, a society of great promise left with dulled sensibilities.

In the novel, Achebe presents a colonial Igbo society having two kinds of socialization. The young women of Umuofia were still being socialized primarily in the domestic values of the Igbo culture, while Obi, the central character of the novel, has a socialization which includes immersion in the British culture by virtue of his studying abroad. In contrast to Obi's foreign socialization, the protagonist's sisters are still the traditionalists that their grandmothers were in pre-colonial Igbo society. The relationship between daughters and parents confers a degree of respectability on motherhood, which supports and nurtures life in Umuofia society.

One aspect of the respectability engendered by the parent-daughter relationship is the nurturing daughter theme which Achebe explores constantly in several of his works. Achebe sees that nurturing daughters fulfill a much-needed social function: the care of elderly parents. This social obligation has been abandoned because the traditional social order built upon familial ties has been rent by love of money, a new social value brought into prominence by colonialism. Within the new economic dispensation, the value of money at the expense of family cohesiveness emerges

and restructures family relations in colonial Igbo society. The economic pressure for women to earn a living outside of the family forces Obi's sisters and other female family members to seek gainful employment away from home. Achebe describes this phenomenon as follows:

> At that moment Obi's father rang his little bell to summon the family to morning prayers. He was surprised when he came in with the lamp and saw Obi already there. Eunice came in wrapped up in loin-cloth. She was the last of the children and the only one at home. That was what the world had come to. Children left their old parents at home and scattered in all directions in search of money. It was hard on an old woman with eight children. It was like having a river and yet washing one's hand with spittle (NLA 122).

However, Eunice, the last girl of the family, is presented not as a lover of money but someone who stays at home and becomes a nurturer of her frail parents. Although the new generation of Igbo women under colonial rule appears to have left home to find personal and economic fulfillment, it is still ironic that the young women have not completely escaped the nurturing role that the traditional society ascribed for them. Achebe tells us that,

> Behind Eunice came Joy and Mercy, distant relations who had been sent by their parents to be trained in housekeeping by Mrs. Okonkwo (NLA 122).

As housekeepers, even outside of their home, the young Igbo women are keepers of the nurturing values of their society.

Filial love is still expected to be expressed in every demonstrable way. For Eunice, this is so true -- she stood by her mother, Hannah, at her time of death. Achebe uses Hannah's impending death to show the importance of nurturing daughters in a social order where the unity of the mother-daughter relationship had been broken. Eunice's and Hannah's love for each other was not negatively impacted by the contradictions of social realities in a colonial society. Also, Eunice's love and service to her parents are never propelled into spasms of anxiety and fear. Filial love took hold of her actions naturally, providing evidence of the necessity of reciprocal nurturing needed for the family to survive the intrusion of death. When a mother inculcated the virtues of good maidenhood and motherhood into her daughters, she perpetuated Mother Africa and African culture, based on the integrity of individual families comprising the larger family -- the clan.

Before the coming of colonialism, Igbo society had an osu system in which some less privileged members of society

were considered outcasts. These were individuals whose forebears had chosen to dedicate themselves as slaves to the gods. Because colonialism was not privy to such cultural subtleties, the osu system ruptures and disintegrates. Therefore, the colonial disruption of the culture provides incredible opportunities for osu individuals to reject the Igbo tradition which, after all, discriminates against them. Thus, Achebe's *No Longer At Ease* includes Clara, an osu woman, whose socialization and outlook are clearly incompatible with Igbo values and priorities, even though her values are similar to those of Obi's, the privileged Igbo male.

Both Obi and Clara are educated at home and abroad, yet gender plays a major role in their lives. Obi's rearing and the quest for foreign education is supposed to bring power and honor to Umuofia's people. Obi's privileged rearing in the form of British education and his traveling to a foreign land is probably the fulfillment of a prophecy for his parents, a prophecy that makes a profound impression upon Isaac Okonkwo's mind during his son's childhood. Obi's village collects money for a scholarship "to send some of their bright young men to study in England" (NLA 6). We are told that Umuofians "taxed themselves mercilessly" and "the first scholarship under the scheme was awarded to Obi

Okonkwo" (NLA 6). They want Obi to read law so that when he returns, he can handle all their land cases against their neighbors. Obi is reared to be promising and to distinguish himself at school, both at home and abroad.

Clara, the osu woman, also goes to England just like Obi, but there are differences in their rearing and education. Obi's departure to England causes a great deal of celebration, with speeches and prayers. Reverend Samuel Ikedi says at the prayer meeting that the occasion was the fulfillment of the prophecy for Obi's father and the Umuofian people. According to the Reverend Ikedi, "The people which sat in darkness saw a great light, And to them which sat in the region and shadow of death To them did light spring up" (NLA 7-9). Isaac Okonkwo, the prodigal son of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, known then as Nwoye, and his wife, Hannah, are happy that from their son Obi, a new light will spring up in Umuofia because the people of Umuofia understood the importance of modern knowledge. In contrast, however, Clara's departure to England for her education is not accompanied with the same celebration that the reader finds in the case of Obi's.

Obi returns from England with changed values and a changed attitude; and he encounters two unresolved conflicts -- one with the social, political, and economic assumptions

related to his new status as an Igbo elite, and the other regarding his affair with Clara, a nurse he met on the boat when returning to Nigeria and with whom he fell in love. On his return from England, Obi brings with him new ideas and different values; and by default, the Union of Umuofia has fostered on Obi a socialization that supports tribal solidarity and self-interest, and which ultimately produces a conflict between Obi and his clan. Obi feels that the demands being made upon him because of his socialization in the traditional culture are unacceptable, that he is an alien with a different set of values. He cannot make a decision about his people's demands, in part, because of his love for Clara, and becomes a willed participant in a war of cultural values.

In dealing with the Umuofia Progressive Union and his parents, Obi's behavior symbolizes the clash between traditional rearing and modern values. Members of the union expect Obi to honor custom and tradition, but they are shocked by his affair with Clara, the osu woman. As an osu, Clara is expected by the Igbo tradition to live apart from the free-born of society. As Richard Priebe (1988) points out, the imposition of Christianity on traditional Igbo society affords a great shock to the system, but does not shatter it (55). What Priebe says about Christianity is

also true for the osu system. Even though colonialism, with its 'modernizing' influence, may have ruptured some of the cultural assumptions about an osu, it did not eradicate the osu system. The love affair between Obi and Clara clearly contradicts the values of his traditional culture. When Obi points out the inconsistency between Christian belief and the osu taboo held by his father, the latter replies uncompromisingly:

> "I know Josiah Okeke very well. . . . I know him and I know his wife. He is a good man and a great Christian. But he is osu. Naama, captain of the host of Syria, was a great man and honourable, he was also a mighty man of valour, but he was a leper" (121).

Even Christopher, the educated economist whom Obi respects as a friend, offers no support or consolation to Obi's desires to re-make the values of his society about the osu tradition. Christopher's explanation below about the osu tradition is very revealing of the society's reluctance to accept foreign values in the socialization of its children.

> 'You know, Obi,' he said, 'I had wanted to discuss that matter with you. But I have learnt not to interfere in a matter between a man and a

> woman, especially with chaps like you who have wonderful ideas about love. A friend came to me last year and asked my advice about a girl he wanted to marry. I knew this girl very very well. She is, you know, very liberal. So I told my friend: "You shouldn't marry this girl." Do you know what this bloody fool did? He went and told the girl what I said. That was why I didn't tell you anything about Clara. You may say that I am not broad-minded, but I don't think we have reached the stage where we can ignore all our customs. You may talk about education and so on, but I am not going to marry an osu' (NLA 130).

Christopher's opinion here agrees with a similar view expressed by Joseph, another educated friend of Obi's, who had previously in the novel tried to persuade Obi not to marry an osu woman (NLA 64-66). In spite of what his educated friends thought about the osu tradition, Obi knows that the caste system which makes Clara unsuitable as a wife is irrational. Achebe seems to be using Obi's objection to the osu system as a way of demonstrating his own (Achebe's) objection to the caste system. In order to make Obi into a credible objector, Achebe provides him a motivation that goes back to his childhood. Obi remembers that as a child,

he was frustrated by the two sides of his double heritage. He remembers that when he and his sisters lived in the village, they were taught by their parents to discriminate against people who had different practices from theirs (NLA 53). Achebe recalls this part of Obi's socialization in the following words:

> Isaac Okonkwo was not merely a Christian; he was a catechist. In their first years of married life he made Hannah see the grave responsibility she carried as a catechist's wife. And as soon as she knew what was expected of her she did it, sometimes showing more zeal than even her husband. She taught her children not to accept food in neighbor's houses because she said they offered their food to idols. That fact alone set the children of Okonkwo apart from all others, for among the Ibo, children were free to eat where they liked (53).

It is clear that Obi's childhood is characterized by division and alienation, both of which were to become significant in his adult life. The contradictions in his socialization center on two opposing issues: familial duty based on tradition, and the freedom to choose. Although Obi's reluctance to openly violate the osu tradition and

marry Clara may be due to his sense of familial duty, but as David Cook (1977) rightly points out,

> Obi handles every attempt to lay before his people his determination to marry an osu extremely badly, both through cowardice and arrogance . . . . He reacts to their opposition by sulking, and insulting the neighbours by refusing to see them. His own attitudes are expressed to his father in coldly intellectual terms; he behaves like an outsider and never begins to explain the reasons for his choice in positive or intimate terms which might influence the older folk (89).

Obi's anger at his society's refusal to be accommodation of an osu is not enough to initiate a change in attitudes. He needs the moral courage, which incidentally he lacks, to demonstrate the illogicality of the osu system. Perhaps, through Obi's character, Achebe tries to demonstrate, as Cook (1977) also notes, the irresoluteness that sometimes characterizes the educated elite (91).

Obi's alter ego, Clara, reared and educated at home and abroad just like Obi, is also alienated by cultural taboo. The social limitations forced upon her by her own alienation as an osu forces her to be reluctant to become involved with Obi. The reluctance is also in keeping with Igbo values

which denigrate her heritage. Clara bears her class system from childhood and even after her overseas education. Obi, on the other hand, remains detached and critical. According to David Carroll (1970),

> There was always a part of him, the thinking part, which seemed to stand outside it all, watching the passionate embrace with cynical disdain. The result was that one half of Obi might kiss a girl and murmur: "I lọve you," but the other half would say: "Don't be silly" (80-81).

Obi changes from a detached observer to a rebel who rejects traditional Igbo values. Obi, flaunting his European code of values, is outraged that anyone should feel himself restricted by traditional taboo. He felt,

> It was scandalous that in the middle of the twentieth century a man could be barred from marrying a girl simply because her great-great -great-great-grandfather was dedicated to serve a god, thereby setting himself apart and turning his descendants into a forbidden caste to the end of Time (NLA 65).

Obi Okonkwo is Achebe's anti-hero; the woman in his life, Clara, pregnant with their child, aborts life because

of Obi's irresoluteness. However, Achebe stresses the importance of both genders, male and female, in the struggle to accommodate 'modernity'. He uses Obi's struggles between tradition (represented by his mother) and modernity (represented by Clara) to express concern for the woman's place within man's experience and man's lone struggle with larger social and political forces (Davies 247). Although Gerald Moore (1962) thinks that Obi Okonkwo "is a well-intentioned young man, no weaker-willed than most and anxious to please everybody" (93), but the character's struggle with the social and political forces of his society is, as Abiola Irele (1967) rightly indicates, marked by abdication: "Against an irrational caste system that demands of him a firm stand, against the pressure of a moral problem that calls for individual resolution, Obi has nothing to offer but abdication" (174).

The social expectations that separated male children from female children are slightly ambiguous because those expectations represent stereotypes that must admit variation among particular individuals. Achebe exploits this ambiguity and complicates it through the intrusive influence of Western culture. In other words, the potential for changes, however small, in the roles children were taught to assume, are thrown into dramatic relief with the intrusion

of Western culture. In a sense, Achebe allows the intrusion of Western culture to highlight the fermenting changes under the surface of colonial Igbo society.

While Achebe skillfully investigates the dynamics associated with changing roles in Igbo society, he is not unsympathetic to tradition which he also sees as good and useful to the development of Igbo culture. In addition to the mother-daughter relationship that Achebe constantly explores in his works, the mother-son relationship is another level of nurturing that he also explores in his stories. It will be recalled that in *Things Fall Apart*, a special bond exists between Nwoye and his mother. While Nwoye was, by gender, bonded to Okonkwo, his father, he was never really bonded to him psychologically. Nwoye always enjoyed his mother's guidance and her stories. Achebe does not limit this special bond to his first novel. In *No Longer At Ease*, Obi also experiences such a bond.

> There was a special bond between Obi and his mother. Of all her eight children, Obi was nearest her heart. Her neighbors used to call her Janet until Obi was born and then she immediately became Obi's mother (68).

When Obi was about ten, the rusty razor blade that he forgot to remove from the pocket of his clothes cuts his

mother's hand severely when she washes clothes. She returns with the clothes unwashed and her hand dripping with blood. This incident cemented the bonds of love and affection between mother and son: "It bound him very firmly to her" (NLA 69). The binding force of the bloody accident produces an indelible mark on the minds of mother and son. Thus, when Obi was proposing to violate the tradition of his society and marry Clara, he saw the need to obtain his mother's approval: "'If I could convince my mother', he thought, 'all would be well'" (68).

Obi's struggle between his loyalty to Clara and his blood loyalty to his mother is significant. His mother -- not his father -- represents traditional culture, and the violation of the norms of traditional culture is a grave matter, even for Obi, for whom "it was either Clara or nobody" (68). Obi must convince his mother that the violation of custom is acceptable. His belief that he can convince his mother that such violation is acceptable is ironic. Obi is bound to his mother by blood -- literally and symbolically -- yet "he was almost certain that he could" convince her to overcome the bonds of tradition. Achebe shows that Obi's position is untenable when Obi's mother dies and when Clara has an abortion. Clara cannot replace Mother Africa, Obi's mother. Clearly, Obi's

response to his mother's death is another piece of evidence that Mother Africa cannot be replaced, that blood is thicker than water. In fact, in spite of Obi's mother's resistance to change, Obi expresses unusual sorrow and frustration at the news of his mother's death. As soon as he saw a post office messenger in khaki and steel helmet walking towards his table with the telegram, he knew something was wrong (NLA 146). For Obi, time had stopped. He could not connect the death of the blood tradition represented by his mother with the enigmatic and muddy future which Clara embodies.

The dialogue from the meeting of the Umuofia Progressive Union also confirms the power of blood. In the meeting, a pompous man says to the other younger men,

> You see this thing called blood. There is nothing like it. That is why when you plant a yam it produces another yam, and if you plant an orange it bears oranges. I have seen many things in my life, but I have never yet seen a banana tree yield a cocoyam (145).

The pompous man goes on to suggest that Obi's failure to attend his mother's funeral is due to his father's blood. The irony is rich here, and Achebe creates the irony to show the need for blood lines that are linked to both father and mother. A boy inherits his father's behavior and that

behavior, unmitigated by the mother's bond of blood to the son, will cause the son to forsake custom and ultimately forsake the mother, the standard-bearer of custom. When that happens the social order is no longer at ease. Whereas Obi's mother, in her tripartite role as wife, loving mother, and farmer, used her maternal function to guide her son to follow the traditions, mores, and customs of society, Obi's father negates those customs by introducing "bad" blood into the social order. The "bad" blood, of course, is behavior that contradicts the role of Mother Africa as the legitimate blood bonding of the social order.

Ultimately the conflict is between tradition and change. In Obi's life, when the conflict between tradition and change is played out, change loses, but tradition also dies. In varying degrees, colonization has dealt a death blow to Umuofia's tradition, mores, and other forces of traditional wisdom, as well as political, social, and moral structures, and things have fallen apart. There is an impasse between the old and the new.

Another aspect of that impasse is the conflict between African ancient religion and the new Western religion. In particular, Igbo culture has been strongly influenced by goddess worship; thus, Mother Africa is not merely a social symbol, but a religious symbol as well. The traditional

polytheistic worship of goddesses is in direct violation of Christian monotheism. Achebe highlights the tension between those two religions when, in *Things Fall Apart*, Nwoye converts to the Christian religion. Nwoye's conversion is especially important because it is based in part on Nwoye's difficult and unsatisfactory relationship with Okonkwo and in part on Nwoye's bond with his mother. The irony is that the mother's support leads to a rift with the traditional religion, a religion based on goddess worship. The irony becomes more pronounced when that rift reveals the triumph of Christianity, a religion based on the worship of a single God characterized as male, over the traditional religion.

However, the triumph of Christianity does not necessarily portend happiness or lasting peace for reformed traditionalists who embraced it. Obi's father, Nwoye, in *Things Fall Apart*, is an uncompromising believer in the Christian faith but still upholds the traditional ethos that abhors marriage with an osu. He fails to support his son's love for Clara, an osu girl. This is a deep-seated contradiction in the male-dominated colonial Igbo society. The contradiction ridicules a 'fake' cultural hybridity of the kind represented by Isaac Okonkwo.

Because of her gender, it is surprising though that Obi's mother also supports the abhorrence of an osu even

when the victim is of the same biological gender. The stance taken by Obi's mother is perhaps an indication of her willingness not to allow motherly instincts or sentiments to stand in the way of upholding tradition, even if the tradition is illogical and indefensible. This attitude appears to be the attitude of a strong woman; a woman who, unlike the mothers in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), is not mired in her womanhood. Even on her death bed, Obi's mother's toughness is clearly unmistakable. When Obi came home from Lagos to see her family, he was full of tears at the sight of the physical condition he met his mother. The mother, on the other hand, took her illness with a stoic courage. On her bed, she held her hand out to Obi and greeted him. Achebe describes the encounter thus:

> As he looked at his mother on her bed, tears stood In Obi's eyes. She held out her hand to him and he Took it - all bone and skin like a bat's wing.
>
> 'You did not see me when I was ill,' she said. 'Now I am as healthy as a young girl.' She laughed without mirth. 'You should have seen me three weeks ago. How is your work. Are Umuofia people in Lagos all well? . . . (NLA 116).

Obi's mother encapsulates the image of a strong Igbo woman who even in the face of death maintains her dignity and

grace. Curiously enough, this is a role traditionally reserved for men in Igbo society. Men are not supposed be afraid of dying. Therefore, by being courageous in the face of death, Obi's mother may be said to have displayed in her character that which is also male -- the ability to 'look at death squarely in the face'.

In *Arrow of God* (1964), Achebe shows the inevitable conflicts associated with the meeting of two cultures and the cultural war that might result. Through the plot, Achebe demonstrates that such warfare produces casualties. In contrast to *No Longer At Ease* where locales shift between the village and the city, locale in *Arrow of God* is essentially a village one. It is therefore not surprising to find in *Arrow of God* that village women are still in their traditional roles as wives rearing and bringing up their sons and daughters, and assisting their husbands in the running of the family. The roles also include not only being good mothers, but managing the family farm, selling farm goods, and serving as petty traders. As in the precolonial times, family life in *Arrow of God* is structured along polygamous households. Mothers serve as arbiters and moderating forces in the father's hard masculine dealings with the sons. For example, in the relationship of Ezeulu with his sons, Obika and Nwafo, the mothers are the

mellowing wind in the intemperate storm that constantly arises (*AOG* 10-13; 194-224). These mother-son and father-son relationships are similar to those in Okonkwo's household in *Things Fall Apart*. What the similarity suggests is that even in colonial Igbo society, the traditional family structures of the pre-colonial times were still very much present in many Igbo communities.

In *Arrow of God*, Achebe chooses an aged Ezeulu and his household as the focus of family life in Igbo colonial society. Through Ezeulu one sees the workings of traditional Igbo society. In his polygamous household, like Okonkwo's, gender role is important in the rearing of children. Ezeulu plays the role of the patriarch who, like Okonkwo, rules his household with an iron hand. He is also a traditional priest who interprets for Umuaro the will of the god, and performs important rituals in the life of his village and family. He is also in charge of important festivals in the community -- the festival of pumpkin leaves and that of the New Yam (AOG 3). Again, Achebe links religion with fertility and with gender. However, unlike the precolonial society of *Things Fall Apart*, in which a female figure was the spiritual head of the society, Achebe uses a male figure in *Arrow of God* to dramatize the tragedy of a society that is run entirely on the male principle.

The various encounters between Ezeulu and Mr. Winterbottom may be described as episodes in a drama of subjugation; and the defeat and humiliation of Ezeulu by Mr. Winterbottom, the colonial administrator, seems to suggest that the Igbo society of the time needs more than the male principle to survive the subjugation. In fact, the gender of the two players in the drama appears to be significant. By virtue of their gender, Ezeulu and Winterbottom may be said to represent the destructive impulses of the Igbo society; and Achebe may be absolving the female gender of any blame for the triumph of colonialism in Igbo society.

Achebe also focuses on family relationships to depict how the colonial Igbo society relied too much on its male principle. Describing the excitement that greeted the new moon in Ezeulu's compound, Achebe tells us, that

> The little children in his compound joined the Rest in welcoming the moon. Obiageli's tiny voice Stood out like a small *ogene* among drums and flutes. He could also make out the voice of his youngest son, Nwafo. The women too were in the open, talking (AOG 2).

The fact that Ezeulu could make out the voice of his little son in a group of children suggests Ezeulu's interest in his son. This incident which may appear inconsequential at face

value actually demonstrates the strong Igbo cultural assumptions about male children: important, priceless, and the primogenitors of their race.

Achebe also reinforces in *Arrow of God* the traditional view of women as problems when in the excitement that greeted the new moon, little Obiageli inquires about the mythical power of the moon from her mother.

> "Does the moon kill people?" asked Obiageli, tugging at her mother's cloth.
>
> "What have I done to this child? Do you want to strip me naked?"
>
> "I said does the moon kill people?"
>
> "It kills little girls," said Nwafo, her brother.
>
> "I did not ask you, ant-hill nose."
>
> "You will soon cry, long throat."
>
> The moon kills little boys
>
> The moon kills ant-hill nose
>
> The moon kills little boys . . . Obiageli turned everything into a song. (AOG 2-3)

Obiageli comes across in the episode above as an assertive little girl. The exact reason for her assertive behavior is not very clear in the story, but perhaps the behavior is a sign of the spirit of the time. With colonialism taking over the land and men failing to stop the wind of change,

perhaps the male mystique was beginning to wear thin, and the assertiveness we see in Obiageli was to foreshadow a future that is different for Igbo women.

The contrast between Ezeulu's recognition of Mwafo's voice and Mwafo's statement that the moon kills little girls also alludes to the dichotomy between the genders in Igbo society which we have seen already in Achebe's works. That such a dichotomy is also important in *Arrow of God* suggests that tradition was still strong in many Igbo communities in the colonial times.

This dichotomy between male and female children and their unequal status in society, much like the dichotomy Okonkwo frequently articulated when he made distinctions between boys who were real boys and boys who were women, is perhaps not absolute. For Ezeulu, a traditional priest in a colonial era, everybody and everything has a usefulness that should be explored. Ezeulu's pragmatism undercuts the seemingly monolithic view of genders constantly expressed in *Things Fall Apart* (1958). His pragmatism, which may also have been dictated by the spirit of the time, is particularly apparent when Ezeulu sends Oduche to join the missionaries. Ezeulu tells Oduche, "If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something there you will bring home my share" (46-51). Ezeulu shapes his

directive in terms of harvesting. He is a priest who deserves his share of the crop, and he will have his share, even if it is found in another religion.

However, after Ezeulu commissions Oduche to join the Christian religion, Nwafo becomes the interpreter of the new religion. On asking his father if the latter knew the message of the ringing bell in the Christian church, the father indicated his ignorance, and Nwafo explained the message thus:

> "It is saying: Leave your yam. Leave your cocoyam and come to Church. That is what Oduche says."
>
> "Yes," said Ezeulu thoughtfully.
>
> "It tells them to leave their yam and their cocoyam, does it? Then it is singing the song of extermination." (AOG 47)

Nwafo is perhaps implicating that the new pluralism that colonialism has brought and which Ezeulu, the Igbo patriarch, appears to embrace threatens to undo traditional Igbo religion, which is inextricably linked with agricultural production and human fertility. But Ezeulu embraces pluralism nonetheless. Even when Oduche's mother protests the choice of her son as a means of exploring the new religion Ezeulu disagrees, and in reply to her, he impatiently asks:

"How does it concern you what I do with my son? You say you do not want Oduche to follow strange ways. Do you not know that in a great man's household there must be people who follow all kinds of strange ways? There must be good people and bad people, honest workers and thieves, peace-makers and destroyers; that is the mark of a great obi. In such a place, whatever music you beat on your drum there is somebody who can dance to it." (50-51).

Although Ezeulu appears to be wise in his pragmatism because of his pluralistic view of religion which is fulfilled in the conversion of his son, Oduche, to Christianity, yet Ezeulu represents unambiguously the specter of oppression for Igbo women during the colonial period. Ezeulu is an oppressive male figure who denies women any rights even in matters affecting their children. In other words, the status of women in colonial Igbo society was still characterized by male domination.

It is also interesting to note that Oduche's conversion to Christianity, ironically, undermines Ezeulu's hope that Oduche would replace him as the next priest of his own traditional religion. Oduche does become a priest in the sense that all Christians are part of the "priesthood of

believers," but such a priesthood is exclusive, not pluralistic. Thus, Nwafo's prophetic statement indicating cultural extermination comes true also. The agricultural-religious-gender complex is brought into question and cannot survive critical scrutiny. Achebe, while not accepting the exclusivity of Christianity, does appear to sanction the pluralism of Ezeulu, recognizing that the integration of gender roles must include a reconfiguration of traditional Igbo society. Such a reconfiguration will necessitate a revision of the agricultural-religious-gender complex which ironically will also undermine traditional sources of authority. In addition, because the decision to allow Oduche to convert to Christianity was made solely by Ezeulu, therefore the responsibility for undermining traditional religion must also be solely that of Ezeulu's. Once again, we find that the appropriation of traditional culture during the colonial era was entirely by male figures.

Women's positive roles are generally illustrated in *Arrow of God* within the context of the family. For example, during traditional festivities, Ezeulu's wives join hands to cook for guests in a very familial, cooperative manner. They also collaborate in cooking for their children. Through such collaborative relationships between wives, mothers, sons, and daughters, the domestic drama of Igbo

society is seen at its best. The mother promoted harmony, domestic tranquility, and compassion. At other times, however, Ezeulu's wives can be seen as timorous and fearful because of their anxiety for their children. For example, in the pandemonium that followed Oduche's imprisonment of the sacred python in a box, the mothers were alarmed and they shouted at the top of their voices (*AOG* 44-45). Achebe describes the pandemonium as follows:

> It was not easy and the old priest was covered with sweat by the time he succeeded in forcing the box. What they saw was enough to blind a man. Ezeulu stood speechless. The women and the children who had watched from afar came running down. Ezeulu's neighbour, Anosi, who was passing by branched in, and soon a big crowd had gathered. In the broken box lay an exhausted royal python (AOG 45).

In contrast to the emotional response of Ezeulu's wives to the Oduche incident, Ezeulu appears calm and sensible. While the women were screaming, Ezeulu takes charge of the situation. Here, Ezeulu's composure contrasts with the emotionalism of his wives. Although it is possible, through a feminist reading of the passage, to see a negative portrayal in the emotionalism that Achebe associates with the women, the truth of the matter is that the women as

nurturers of society did not wish to abandon their duty to shield children from the adverse effects of challenging a deity, and from the threat of the unknown.

This desire of Igbo women to protect their children, especially daughters, from unpleasant situations is also seen in the conflict between Ugoye and Obiageli. Mothers seem always willing to protect their daughters even from their male siblings. For instance, during a singing contest, Ugoye intervened on behalf of her daughter, Obiageli:

> "No, no, no," Nkechi broke in.
>
> "What can happen to Earth, silly girl?" asked Nwafo.
>
> "I said it on purpose to test Nkechi," said Obiageli.
>
> "It is a lie as old as you are you can't even tell a simple story."
>
> "If it pains you, come and jump on my back, ant-hill nose."
>
> "Mother, if Obiageli abuses me again I shall beat her."
>
> "Touch her if you dare and I shall cure you of your madness this night."
>
> Obiageli continued her song (*AOG* 65-66).

In defending Obiageli, Ugoye is confronted with a world where ritual, tradition, and convention were the motivating factors of action. Maternal influences are corrective, not retributive, and compassionately bring about harmony in the family, pacifying in the middle of conflicting issues.

In *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu clearly controls the destiny and the movement of the novel, and with the help of his wives, he controls his household including his three sons -- Edogo the oldest, Obika the middle son, and Nwafo the youngest -- with the iron hand of tradition. While Ezeulu's wives and mother do not seem to play significant roles, they are the hands that rock the cradles and rule the world. But Ezeulu's relationship with his sons almost interferes with the mother's relationships with the sons. Ezeulu's disruptive relationship is seen most prominently in his relationship with Obika, the intemperate son, whose personal tragedy at the end of the novel so closely resembles that of his father's and his god, Ulu (260-61).

Achebe's *No Longer At Ease* (1960) and *Arrow of God* (1964), undoubtedly, provide us a glimpse into Igbo society in the throes of colonialism. They also show the strain that is put on family relationships when the social order is challenged by foreign influences. While Achebe does not believe that the status quo is always accurate in its

perception of how the social order should operate, he does recognize that the foreign influences that have questioned the validity of the traditional status quo may themselves be destructive. For instance, Mother Africa, which symbolizes what is essentially African, can lead men to be true fathers, even in the image of the Christian God, but the "secularization" of the family that accompanies Christianity in the form of capitalism can destroy the family ties that are essential for African culture to be maintained, as we see in *No Longer At Ease* when Igbo young women leave home in search of economic fulfillment, robbing the Igbo society of its nurturers.

Ultimately, Achebe seems pessimistic about the dominance of foreign values over traditional values because not only do things fall apart so that people are no longer at ease, the very people who by virtue of their knowledge are designated as community leaders or arrows of their gods may become weapons of destruction, shutting down the traditional values and social order that represents what is truly African. Whatever we may infer from Achebe's portrayal of women in traditional or colonial Igbo society, and whatever the gravity of our disappointment with him for not giving women enough visibility in his novels, any suggestion that he presents a misogynistic representation of

women is clearly unjustified. Achebe simply portrays a society whose cultural assumptions are different from many other societies, and he owes no apologies for presenting his society with the realism it deserves.

# CHAPTER 4

## Women in Postcolonial Igbo Society

An evolving contemporary view of the Igbo society is depicted by Achebe in *A Man of the People* (1967), *Girls At War* (1972), and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). In these works, Achebe is particularly concerned about the struggles of a post-independence society in which the coming together of traditional and non-traditional values is less than harmonious. Achebe recognizes that a change in the traditional value system has caused things to fall apart, but in reconstructing what has fallen apart, the Igbos piece together a social system that incorporates traditional values with foreign values. The chapter explores how Achebe addresses the consensus that developed between the two value systems as they relate to the family and the position of women in a postcolonial society.

In Igbo society, as in many other African societies, the relationship between family values and morality can be seen in the society's assumptions about marriage. According to Achebe, traditional Igbo society views the process of

betrothal and the consummation of marriage as a long process that involves family members in the community. Victor Uchendu (1965), an Igbo anthropologist, tells us that no matter how the Igbo man acquires a wife,

> the process of betrothing and marrying an Igbo girl is a long, ceremonious one. It often takes years and is seldom accomplished in months. Marriage is so important and nothing concerning it is taken lightly. The whole process falls into four interrelated stages for both the male and the female: asking the female's consent, working through a middleman, testing both characters (especially that of the female), and debating the bride-wealth (51).

Traditional Igbo society also requires that when a girl is about to marry, her spouse will provide palm wine for consumption at his prospective father-in-law's house. The whole families of the marrying couple, including members of their extended family, would assemble for the occasion. According to George Basden, an anthropologist, wooden trays of different sizes and designs containing kola nuts and alligator pepper, "ose oma," are brought to the father of the bride. A big pot of fresh wine is adorned with a yellow palm-frond, "omu," tied around the neck of the pot of wine.

The wine, designated as the "sacred wine," is of high quality and only titled men may partake of it. "Omu" serves as a protective agent and a mark of respect. Thus, "Omu" is tied to the wrists as a sign of victory, the "laurel" of the triumphant conqueror (Basden 410).

Marriage relationships have an important value in Igbo social life. Every male and female knows that such is a function to be fulfilled at the age of puberty. The life of celibacy is not favored among traditional Igbo people. After marriage a woman is attached to her husband's household and she becomes her husband's 'property'. The husband secures her with power and love. He honors her because he expects an increase of descendants from her. He believes he has a valuable partner for he is bringing another person into his father's compound and family. The wife becomes then a full member of the clan, has a rightful place and equal share in all things pertaining to her husband (Basden 214).

Traditional laws prescribe rigid marital and legal requirements for Igbos born of different status. For instance, marriage between osu (cult slaves) and diala (freeborn) is taboo. Both diala and osu obey this traditional rule. In addition, a man's status is important for marriage formalities. He must take a title before he

could be admitted to important meetings and marriages. Wives, on the other hand, are not part of the decision-making process among the "Ozo" who represent and preserve the ancestral laws (see Uchendu, 49-50). Wives have no official input for the settlement of the bride price for their daughters. However, the wives do have status because they own and share a great quantity of their husband's wealth. They also confer and decide privately with husbands about the amount of wealth that is given to the bride and the exchange of gifts.

Parents do not lose time in rearing and decorating their children in preparation for marriage and status. Both boys and girls are reminded that certain behaviors cannot be tolerated in the family or by society. It is often said to girls, "You are a girl and not a boy. You must marry one day!" Such comments are made by irritated parents to encourage a girl to conform to Igbo traditions (Uchendu 53). Parents will expect a boy to be a man, industrious, sensible, and obey Igbo traditions. In addition, husbands and wives must seek to rear their children to obey and respect the laws of their Supreme God, the laws of the land "ala," the Motherland, and to obey their parents. Marriage is important, furthermore, because it transcends death. As Uchendu (1965) points out, marriage is "an alliance between

two families rather than a contract between two individuals. As far as the widow is concerned, death does not terminate the alliance" (51).

Achebe, in examining the dynamics of marital relationships, is particularly interested in the tension between traditional and Christian values in a polygamous society. Achebe's interest is due in part to the complex collage of male and female characters and role-playing that are prominently displayed in a polygamous value system. Such a system exhibits vast congeries of functions in the daily drama of Nigerian life, but these multifarious functions are especially evident in Achebe's perception of the relationships between husbands and wives in a polygamous social setting in which wives have a limited destiny of their own. They do not simply hover on the fringes of the plot (see Jones and Palmer, 14-15), but are partly co-rulers with their husbands, as when wives consult with their husbands about the marriage dowry.

To get married and be blessed with fertility was the constant prayer of every Igbo household. Not bearing male children could be a reason for traditional parents to become involved in polygamy. The search for wealth or riches may be another reason. Since husbands and wives in the traditional society were mostly farmers, wives and their

children were assumed to be an important asset to the family's agrarian economy.

In colonial Igbo society, as depicted by Achebe's earlier novels, *No Longer At Ease* and *Arrow of God*, there is little evidence that the traditional view of male-female relationships changed from pre-colonial times. This is certainly true of *Arrow of God*'s Ezeulu and his wives. Even in *No Longer At Ease*, Obi, the perfect example of a thoroughly Westernized Igbo male, still sought his mother's approval in his desire to marry Clara, the osu woman. Relationships between men and women were never constructed arbitrarily. Promiscuity was a serious taboo, and lovers were still guided by tradition in their relationships.

However, in the postcolonial society that Achebe presents in *A Man of the People* (1974), morality has become much more relaxed than in the traditional or colonial society. Women have become, in the minds of many Westernized or pseudo-Westernized Igbo males, objects of conquest. Just as colonialism has forcibly acquired their lands and territories, some men in Achebe's later novels seem to have appropriated similar acquisitive instincts toward women. Achebe represents these instincts in the character Irre, Odili's next-door neighbor at the university. Narrating through Odili, Achebe describes the

morally-bankrupt mentality of the new Igbo elite thus:

> . . . . The funny part of it was that my next-door neighbour -- an English Honours student and easily the most ruthless and unprincipled womanizer in the entire university campus -- changed to calling me Ralph from that day. He was known to most students by his nickname, Irre, which was short for Irresponsible. His most celebrated conquest was a female undergraduate who had seemed so inaccessible that boys called her Unbreakable. Irre became interested in her and promised his friends to break her one day soon. Then one afternoon we saw her enter his rooms . . . . later Irre came out glistening with sweat . . . . held up a condom bloated with his disgusting seed (AMP 23).

By choosing a university undergraduate to represent the morally-suspect endeavor of the new elite, Achebe appears to have deliberately embodied the degenerate instincts in a privileged male individual who also by virtue of his education represents the society's future, a future which Achebe seems to be suggesting is morally bankrupt.

In Achebe's estimation, the blame for constructing a morally-bankrupt society in the postcolonial era is not for men alone; women are equally guilty. For example, in the

case of the female undergraduate who was seduced by Odili's next-door neighbor at the university, it is possible to excuse her behavior on the grounds of naivete or inexperience. However, women such as Elsie deserve no such sympathy from the reader. Such women must accept responsibility for participating in their own misappropriation. In the words of Odili,

> Elsie was, and for that matter still is, the only girl I met and slept with the same day - in fact within an hour. I know that faster records do exist and am not entering this one for that purpose, nor am I trying to prejudice anyone against Elsie. I only put it down because that was the way it happened. . . (AMP 22).

Elsie comes across as a morally-lax young woman who has no regard for 'tradition'. She is a far cry from the women of traditional Igbo society that we see in *Things Fall Apart*, or even the colonial society of *Arrow of God*. Women like Elsie have turned morality on its head for the purpose of securing their own needs and wants in society. In a dialogue with Odili, Andrew provides some interesting insight into the relationship between Elsie and the duplicitous politician, Chief Nanga.

"Who is she?" I said.

"Who?'

"The girl with the Minister."

"His girl-friend."

"I see."

"Actually it's more than that. He is planning to marry her according to native law and custom. Apparently his missus is too 'bush' for his present position so he wants a bright new 'parlour-wife' to play hostess at his parties." (AMP 21).

Although the relationship between Chief Nanga and his young girl-friend, Elsie, was expected to be consummated in marriage, we cannot ignore the foundation on which the relationship was based in the first place: exploitation. Chief Nanga finds his first wife unworthy of his new status as a Minister, and decides to find a replacement to enhance his image. This is a clear example of gender exploitation. According to Susan Stanford Friedman (1989), a feminist critic, "Women's oppression begins with the control of the body, the fruits of labor" (94). However, who do we blame in the case of women such as Elsie who participate in their own 'oppression'? Surely, we can blame the institutions of the patriarchal society which have constructed society in such a way that men have historically had more powers,

economic and political, than women. That, in the opinion of a female reader such as the writer of this dissertation, is a hollow argument that ignores self-determinism on the part of women. Women like Elsie are not just victims, but are willing participants in the 'theater of gender exploitation'.

The most important socializing agents in traditional Igbo society were women, in the case of female children, and husbands (for male children). In the post-independence, Westernized society, the socializing roles of mothers have become limited, or even thwarted. Western education has taken center stage, competing with mothers in the socialization of their children. The new socializing trends contribute in some measure to create immoral figures like Irre and Elsie, and political opportunists like Chief Nanga, the corrupt minister of culture.

As Carroll (1970) rightly points out, Chief Nanga and Odili Samalu, the political idealist, occupy opposite ends of the political spectrum (119). Odili Samalu is reared and educated as a university graduate and secondary school teacher. Reared by his father to become one of the courageous males of his society, he has close involvement with Chief Nanga and with the political life of the country. By his training, Odili possesses idealism and a desire to

create a better society than that in which he lives (see Killam 87). Odili's socialization is tempered by an awareness of practical realities and a capacity for decisive if not always serviceable action. Odili does not act mostly on arrogance or personal honor like Okonkwo and Ezeulu, but on reason. Odili and Chief Nanga, though both 'educated' political figures, are two different products emerging after the colonial era.

Chief Nanga represents fraudulent political behavior, and employs dishonest means to achieve political prominence. Odili is nevertheless overwhelmed by Chief Nanga's charisma or seduced to his opportunistic way of thinking and acting. Odili is a keen observer who accepts an invitation to be Nanga's guest in the Capital City, and there sees first hand the extravagant life lived by senior members of government. Of the experiences gained through his brief but intense association with Nanga, Odili remarks:

> But sitting at Chief Nanga's feet, I received enlightenment; many things began to crystallize out of the mist -- some of the emergent forms were not nearly as ugly as I had suspected but many seemed much worse (AOP 37).

When Nanga steals Odili's lover, Odili initially acts from motives of revenge. But later in his idealism, he

joins a new and rival political party to fight the decadent values of a self-indulgent society, especially represented by politicians like Nanga.

As in his other works, Achebe links power with the abuse of women. However, the change in locale requires a shift in the type of abuse. In the village setting, husbands like Okonkwo can abuse their wives physically, emotionally, and mentally. In the city, men like Nanga must use charisma and rhetoric to seduce women. That seduction, however, is not limited to women. Nanga also seduces Odili intellectually. Nanga's power is based on his rhetorical-political abilities to seduce. Nanga, who according to Achebe, is a born politician with the rare gift of making people feel comfortable even while he is saying harsh things to them (AOP 62), is also a seducer who assumes a vitality or stature that is very compelling in the novel. As he speaks and jokes with the villagers in Pidgin English, he shares their values and expresses their political hopes. As David Carroll (1970) rightly remarks, he becomes a man of the people in a less ironical sense (131).

While men like Okonkwo and Ezeulu oppressed their women by virtue of their tyrannical rule over their families and their women, profligate politicians like Nanga oppress their

women through the abuse of their new-found political power. The values that Nanga shares with his society are rooted in corruption. Achebe is unmovable in picturing the transition from a colonial milieu to a post-independence setting that is characterized by confusion of values in which the social order is up for grabs.

Nanga, ironically called Chief the Honorable, is a dishonorable leader and a thieving chief whose sole purpose of taking control of the social order is based on self-interest. He has frustrated the traditional male gender expectations in his own family; he has initiated and consummated illicit affairs, and has mocked traditional values by pretending to be on the side of his people. But as the representative of a new order, he cannot be faulted for enticing willing cohorts, even though like Elsie, the people may not fully understand the implications of their association with Nanga. David Carroll (1980) suggests, that

> Achebe's perception seems critical, where *A Man of the People* (1966) creates members of the female gender who are lured by pragmatic, political exigency and morality. Unsuspected women are carried away by the political success of Chief the Honorable Micah A. Nanga, M.P. Elsie, the young girlfriend of Odili and the "Ego Women's Party",

> also became a prey to political ambition. Probably the irresponsibility of Nanga does not deter the swing toward him. No one of the sex wants to be left behind the new sources of wealth, namely, the political agenda (123).

Clearly, in *A Man of the People*, femininity is little more than a naive response to corrupt political power wielded by seducers. Achebe appears to have used the figure of Chief Nanga to represent a new kind of gender oppression in a postcolonial society -- sexual exploitation.

In *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), Achebe provides another example of social pathology in the abuse of parental authority toward a daughter. Beatrice is the name of Dante's famous guide, and Achebe seems to be suggesting in the novel that Beatrice will guide the reader to understand the problems of gender roles in Igbo society. Achebe makes Beatrice such a guide by giving us her perspective on events. For instance, Beatrice provides an 'objective' view of events because of her childlike innocence as a narrator. She is described as,

> a little girl completely wrapped up in her own little world -- a world contained, like Russian dolls, inside the close-fitting world of our mission-house, itself enclosed snugly within the

world of the Anglican Church compound. It was a remarkable place (AOS 77).

From this remarkable place, Beatrice allows the reader to see her father, the vicar, as a brutal man who used his cane to enforce his will on his family, both daughters and wife, and his parishioners. As a vicar, Beatrice's father represents the alliance of religion and violence. We have seen this alliance in Achebe's other works, and Achebe may be saying that religion, whenever it is in the service of a culture that suppresses women or makes radical gender distinctions, cannot help but be violent. Achebe links religion and violence against women whether the religion is 'pagan' or 'Christian'. For Achebe true religion must not be the handmaiden of cultural initiatives that promote inequality between genders. He certainly is condemning Beatrice's father for using violence.

For instance, Beatrice's father uses his cane to beat his daughters when Beatrice chants the expression "uwa t'uwa, uwa t'uwa" during the father's family prayers. As a child, Beatrice had become familiar with the expression "uwa t'uwa", an Igbo translation for "World inside a world inside a world" (AOS 77). Of both expressions which can be reduplicated almost infinitely, Beatrice thinks they literally describe her 'boring' life in the Anglican

personage; and because of the father's verbose prolongation of the family prayers, Beatrice begins to see the prayers as an example of "uwa t'uwa." (AOS 77) On one occasion, she chants the expression in response to her father's prayers. As she tells us,

> One evening, some devil seized hold of me as the words uwa t'uwa were pronounced and jolted me into wakefulness. Without any premeditation whatsoever I promptly raised a childish hymn of thanksgiving: uwa t'uwa! uwa t'uwa! uwa t'uwa! uwa t'uwa! uwa t'uwa! uwa t'uwa!
>
> My sisters' giggles fuelled my reckless chant. My father sprang to his feet with Amen barely out of his mouth, reached for the cane he always had handy and gave us all a good thrashing. As we cried ourselves to sleep on our separate mats that night my sisters saw fit to promise through their sniveling to deal with me in the morning (AOS 78).

Beatrice's father is responding to her daughters' cunning disobedience, a behavior that he seeks to eradicate. The chanting of "uwa t'uwa, uwa t'uwa", therefore, represents a culture of disobedience; and in trying to eradicate that culture from his daughters, especially Beatrice, he is also

responding to Beatrice's 'language' and anything that would challenge his view of culture. As feminist critics working under the rubric of 'sexual difference' remind us, gender can be constructed through language and the speaking subject must enter the symbolic system that is approved by the Law of the Father (see Showalter 3). For Beatrice, therefore, she must speak in the language sanctioned by her father (or society), and to do otherwise was to invite retribution, which was exactly what she got from her father.

While one might think that the Anglican religion might be more 'enlightened' than the 'pagan' religions of traditional society, Achebe seems to be suggesting that Beatrice's father is not different from Okonkwo. Both beat their children and their wives. In the case of Beatrice's father, Beatrice suspects that her father is beating her mother because he takes "precaution to lock the door of their room" and sometimes Beatrice sees her mother "wiping her eyes with one corner of her wrappers, too proud or too adult to cry aloud like us" (AOS 79). Beatrice is powerless to do anything about her mother's predicament, except to fantasize about saving her mother from the beatings:

> It always made me want to become a sorceress that could say 'Die!' to my father and he would die as in the folk-tale. And then, when he had

learnt his lesson, I would bring him back to life and he would never touch his whip again (AOS 79).

The appeal to magic or sorcery is Achebe's way of suggesting that the imagination can conceive of solutions to social problems, but those very problems stifle the imagination, cutting off the source of help. In other words, the eradication of some of the problems prevalent in the postcolonial society may require superhuman efforts from its nurturers.

Even more tragic is Beatrice's rejection by her mother. When Beatrice rushes to hug her mother after her father had beaten the mother, Beatrice felt a sense of betrayal when her mother pushed her away. She tells us that "instead of pressing me to herself as I had expected she pushed me away so violently that I hit my head against the wooden mortar. After that I didn't feel any more like telling my father to die." (AOS 79) In fact, Beatrice later realizes that her mother's response is due in part to Beatrice's own gender.

> I didn't realize until much later that my mother bore me a huge grudge because I was a girl -- her fifth in a row though one had died -- and that when I was born she had so desperately prayed for a boy to give my father (AOS 79).

Beatrice's rejection by her mother, and her sense of betrayal from her mother's rejection of her, both demonstrate Achebe's concern for the ability of postcolonial women to continue to nurture their children. Achebe is also expressing pessimism in the future of a society in which women reject their roles as nurturers, especially when their husbands are no longer performing their own traditional roles well.

The cruelty of Beatrice's father is not even limited to his family. He is also cruel to the other children in the village. Yet Beatrice hears officials constantly praise her father for his strict discipline and the good training he seems to be giving the children of the village through his whip. In fact, when her father talks to the chief of the village, she hears her father equate brutality with order. Beatrice recounts the incident thus:

> My father, with a wistful look I had never seen on his face before, was telling the chief of a certain headmaster in 1940 who was praised by some white inspectors who came from England to look at schools in their colonies and found his school the most quiet in West Africa. 'Das right' said the chief in English (AOS 78).

Children are trained to submit to authority by being punished, and this is what the chief -- representing the people --, and the vicar -- representing religion -- praise. The chief praises such order by saying "Das right," and the vicar praises it with a wistful look that hearkens to the good old days.

Achebe has shown in his novels that he sees a link between culture, religion, and the socialization of the society's subsequent generations. He certainly is pessimistic about change, because culture and religion are so strongly allied that even a change in religion cannot bring about an effective change in culture. His pessimism deepens when he recognizes that brutality enforces psychological repression, especially for women. He uses his characters to question a culture and religion that promote gender-rearing practices based on violence, but it may not be the violence that he questions as much as the reason for the violence: to confuse and undercut both genders by making false distinctions. The motif that Achebe heralds throughout his novels is the unity of the genders, so that each gender becomes what it can be without denying the possibilities of the other. When gender roles are segregated and the segregation is enforced by violence, society suffers and members of the society also suffer.

Even in the colonial times when traditional values were still respected women are portrayed in the traditional roles of mothers and homemakers. For instance in *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu's wives, Ugoye and Akueke, join hands to cook for their husband's guests. In such an atmosphere of cooperation, relationships between mothers and daughters in the daily activities of Igbo society are seen at their best. The woman is a mother, a wife, a cook, a promoter of domestic harmony and tranquility, and a social organizer. The downside of tradition, however, is that women are also submissive and in many ways uneducated. Ezeulu's daughter, Obiageli, becomes the picture of a true Igbo traditional female whose non-traditional assertiveness is not fully realized in any female character until after the civil war, the accounts of which are recorded in Achebe's *Girls At War* (1972). (Issues relevant to the war are explored later in this chapter.)

A further example of the tension between traditional and emerging values in postcolonial Igbo society is found in *Anthills of the Savannah*. In the novel, the gender-biased traditional society shows little understanding that women are exploited when they are reared according to traditional Igbo values. Thus, Beatrice and her sisters are reared under strict, traditional parents. But Beatrice questions

the traditional method of child rearing and rejects it. This creates tension, because mothers, who have been inculcated into the traditional method, try to maintain the household and its family ties despite the strained relationships that develop when children like Beatrice adopt non-traditional behaviors. Beatrice suffers lack of endearment from her parents because she is the fifth female child in a row. Her independence, however, arises from parental rejection and alienation as the 'unwanted' child.

At the same time, Achebe explores the damage that a traditional view of marriage can inflict on matrimony in a more contemporary society. He perceives a vacuum of sorts between a husband and his wife, and between a father and his children when their relationships are based on the traditional view of marriage in which the wife and daughters relate to the family patriarch as subordinates. Such relationships, as Achebe demonstrates in *Anthills of the Savannah*, can only breed loneliness and rejection.

The problem of women's independence is also at issue when Achebe deals with the subject of war in *Girls At War* (1972). During the Nigerian Civil War, which Achebe depicts in his story, life among the Igbos was tumultuous in various ways, also imposing tension on gender roles. Women became involved in warfare, a role traditionally reserved for males

in Igbo society. But instead of being complimented for their courage and contribution to the war efforts, women were at first ridiculed when they volunteered. Achebe demonstrates this tragic view of female participation in the war in an encounter between a female Civil Defense worker and a government official who never took women's participation in the war seriously until he actually met a dedicated female worker at a check-point during one of his travels through the territory (GAW 102). Describing the government official's impression of the female worker, Achebe says:

> But after that encounter at the Awka check-point he simply could not sneer at the girls again, nor at the talk of revolution, for he had seen it in action in that young woman whose devotion had simply and without self-righteousness convicted him of gross levity. What were her words? We are doing the work you asked us to do. He wasn't going to make an exception even for one who once did her a favour. He was sure she would have searched her own father just as vigorously (GAW 103).

It seems that many Igbo women, especially those who participated in the war efforts or had seen other women participate, had been emboldened by their own contributions

in an endeavor that their once traditional society assumed to be a male domain. The assertiveness that little girls like Obiageli had feebly exhibited in the colonial society of *Arrow of God*, appears to have blossomed in Igbo women of the postcolonial era through the war venture.

In addition, the war appears to have done something else for many Igbo women; it helped to relax social inhibitions in male-female relationships, which is a loss of Igbo traditional values. Achebe presents the evidence of this in his story when he describes a romantic liaison between a man and a woman.

> He pulled her to him and kissed her. She neither refused nor yielded fully, which he liked for a start. Too many girls were simply too easy those days. War sickness, some called it (GAW 109).

Perhaps the most powerful indictment of the moral laxity fostered on society by the war is presented by Achebe in the following passage:

> He had his pleasure but wrote the girl off. He might just as well have slept with a prostitute, he thought. It was clear as daylight to him now that she was kept by some army officer. What a terrible transformation in the short period of less than two years! . . . What a terrible fate

to befall a whole generation! The mothers of tomorrow!

By morning he was feeling a little better and more generous in his judgments. Gladys, he thought, was just a mirror reflecting a society that had gone completely rotten and maggoty at the centre . . . (GAW 116).

In addition, women's exposure to colonial forms of training and schooling creates the avenue for personal independence, acquisition of jobs, and other choices that never really existed in a traditional society. However, the woman's new position in a society based on non-traditional values destroys the communal empathy shared by the traditional society for the roles of women as nurturers. In a postcolonial society whose values have been ruptured and re-arranged by a major war, Igbo women appear to have won a hollow victory of gender emancipation. Independence from traditional values has had the unintended consequence of diminishing the Igbo female mystique as Mother Africa, and has produced a new responsibility for the women themselves, that is, the constant battle for survival in a new competitive economic and social order. This aspect of Achebe's perception of the changing status of women in Igbo society in more fully explored in the next chapter.

Undoubtedly, a new value system that is based on women's independence creates new problems for the postcolonial society as newly independent women develop the ability to control their own affairs and to seek self-fulfillment outside of the home. Also the new sexual role of some women does give them some power. While male characters like Irre and Chief Nanga in *A Man of the People* employ their charisma and rhetoric to seduce women, female characters like Elsie of *A Man of the People* and Gladys of *Girls at War* regard such seduction as a female power, a new sphere of authority to achieve prominence and independence at the expense of their men.

# CHAPTER 5

## Independent Females in Achebe's Works and Their Future in Igbo Society

As we have seen in the previous chapters, Achebe's fiction presents pictures of Igbo society that are dominated by males. Most of the women in Achebe's works are steeped in tradition, subservient to their husbands, their roles defined by domesticity. This chapter will consider Achebe's perception of women from two more 'modern' but contrasting perspectives. First, the chapter discusses Achebe's 'prophetic' vision with regard to changes in women's roles in Igbo society; and second, the changes in women's roles that Achebe did not foresee or predict in his fiction.

In traditional Igbo society, as depicted by Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, parents teach their daughters to associate only with girls. Throughout their life, girls are reared to be gentle, and are told stories that avoid violence or bloodshed. A regimented program of development is outlined for girls in their tasks and activities (TFA 24-39). Girls are taught to be like their mothers, and during traumatic times, they take shelter with their mothers.

Concerning the relationship between a man and his wife, both husband and wife or wives are strictly required to obey the social structure. Polygamous rules are made by the husband and his first wife; other wives are connected by childbearing, sickness, and death. Children deliver messages strictly from one woman to another. Wife beating is assumed to be corrective, to bring an erring woman back on track. Women have to submit to forces associated with protection as constructed by men. Girls are denied equality of gender during their rearing period. Women have fewer choices to make in life than men, and these choices are limited and enforced by silence (see also Davies and Graves 241-242). Men consider women as the object of trouble; thus, women suffer accordingly within the customs imposed and perpetuated by the traditional culture (TFA 37).

As we have seen in our analysis of Achebe's fiction, certain female characters of Achebe's do not belong to the traditional mold. They appeared to be living ahead of their times, and are often treated as social freaks, or spurned as gender rebels. In short, they are seen as a cultural anathema, a taboo to society and are perceived as females who are out of context with their cultures. However, they share other commonalties such as resolute will, undeviating courage, defiant attitudes in their purposes, and an extra

dose of common-sense, charisma, and poise. To this category belongs the group of indomitable heroines such as Clara in *No Longer at Ease* (1960), Eunice in *A Man of the People* (1966), and Beatrice in *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987).

Achebe in his fiction foresees the continued centrality of women as matriarchal figures in the social, economic, and psychological order of Nigerian society. Like Ala, mother earth, the earth deity, women are tradition-bound, maintaining the society's fecundity. These traditional roles of women hold true even today. Contemporary Igbo scholar Uche Azikiwe (1992), for example, re-emphasizes that women still lead a life of drudgery of some seventeen hours a day as a mother, wife, cook, and farmer. A woman's work is time-consuming and back-breaking, whether she is pregnant, rearing or weaning a child, or aging. Other aspects of her job include food production and processing; trade and domestic chores; transportation of food, water, and fuel; and creation of home crafts(Azikiwe 7).

It is also generally believed that tradition and culture have relegated women to an inferior social status, and that women's contributions are generally disregarded, neglected, and unrecognized (Azikiwe 8). But certainly the method and quality of women's services have improved beyond Achebe's wildest imagination. In his fiction the methods

look crude and uncouth: women appear to be hewers of wood and drawers of water in Igbo society. The same plot of land is cultivated for generations. Since inheritance is patrilineal, the woman who cultivates the land has no hope of owning the land she maintains.

Modern improvements in these activities have, however, led to improved family incomes and quality of life, great indicators of development and nation-building, and the education of women is a primary reason for this progress. Nigerian society has gradually accepted that women have to be literate to perform their social roles within the new nation (Azikiwe 8-9). Thus, the life of the Igbo woman need not be restricted to the home or the family; they should be able to participate in all spheres of Igbo life.

Although Achebe's early novels presented the Igbo woman as tradition-bound, maintaining traditional roles, his later novels present women in a different light. Achebe's *Girls At War* (1972), for example, presents women as emerging from thralldom. While in *No Longer At Ease* it is Clara alone, and in *Anthills of the Savannah*, Beatrice alone, who defy societal tradition, in *Girls At War* (1972) many women are involved; their non-traditional behavior, then regarded as eccentric, is fast becoming the vogue. In *Girls At War*, women serve as combat soldiers, fighting in the battles, as

well as tending the wounded, and playing other difficult roles. They are seen marching, chanting, and singing war songs in squads where they are paired with their male counterparts. Among their many songs of solidarity with the struggling Biafran nation include:

"We are Biafrans fighting
for our freedom. By the name
of Jesus, we shall conquer" (*GAW* 19).

As a result of their active participation in the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), thousands of women were either maimed or killed in battle, just as men along whose sides they fought heroically (Rose Adaure 6-9). Many women were killed by stray bullets while caring for their children, and the aged were left behind to die. These roles were of a new order compared to Okonkwo's pre-colonial time when women were either protected or hidden from danger. Seeing a woman with a gun or a woman chanting war songs would have been unthinkable in the traditional society.

In her critique of Achebe's *Girls At War*, Rose Adaure (1989) indicates that the story shows the progression in Achebe's thinking that the Igbo woman is in evolution, and that many traditional practices which restrict the roles of women to the family are gradually changing. In *Girls At War*, women wore military uniforms (trousers, shorts, shirts,

and caps); and they dropped the wearing of skirts, gowns, and blouses which distinguished them from men. They also shaved their hair, thus becoming symbolically masculine, if not bohemian (Rose Adaure 12). Such involvement in war caused a social stir among traditional Igbos. Perhaps the negative response among the Igbos to the "new women" explains why Achebe did not glorify the change in women's roles. The adoption of shorts and trousers by the few "Been Tos" such as Clara was frowned upon by the Igbo people; Achebe records these changes in values and roles, but does not glorify them.

After the Nigerian Civil War, ex-service women popularized the wearing of trousers and other men's outfits to the chagrin of Igbo society. This trend which made girls tomboyish and non-traditional was decried by many in society as a travesty of the Igbo culture. Girls who hung their hair loose and wore trousers to church were perceived as evil-worshipers. Wearing trousers was, no doubt, copied from the military women of the Civil War, as well as the more educated and liberated women who had traveled abroad.

In Achebe's early writings, the subject of love, sex, or courtship was left the private psyche of the individual. Whenever mentioned it was within the strict constraints of gender relationships. An example is found in the betrothal

of Ibe and Akueke in *Things Fall Apart*. As Achebe describes, "Obierika and his kinsmen selected a suitor for Akueke who saw Ibe the suitor and the elders of the family for the first time in a half-moon light" (TFA 81).

Unlike Akueke, however, Clara in *No Longer At Ease* accepted an engagement ring from Obi without the benefit of the traditional ceremony. Consequently, Obi's mother threatens suicide, and Obi is unable to conceal his own misgivings, saying that his mother's response "is only a temporary setback," but he fails to convince Clara. Meanwhile, Clara has become pregnant, and to make matters worse, arranges for an abortion (NLA 137-38). Clara's behavior is clearly non-traditional, and Achebe may have used her character to foreshadow a behavior that is now increasingly common in Igbo society, and the Nigerian society at large.

In addition to their love relationship, the characters of Obi and Clara require further examination. Their equality of relationship is facilitated through their being educated. This is especially true for Clara, who holds a responsible position as a nursing sister. Although educated, Clara is still not free from tradition. Her position as a nursing sister makes her a nurturer, a role that traditionally belongs to women in the traditional

society. On the other hand, Obi does not perform any nurturing role even though he is as educated as Clara. Indeed, as Kenneth Little (1980) indicates, "When Obi gets into a financial dilemma it is Clara who provides the money" (11). It is obvious that Clara still perceives herself as a nurturer; and Obi's age and education notwithstanding, she feels compelled to nurture him.

Achebe recognizes the dilemma inherent in the transition from a social order based on tradition to one based on modernity. He predicts, through a character like Clara, the transition in women's social roles. However, that change has a dark moral dimension; Clara's decision to abort a child is a heinous crime against the Igbo tradition. Yet she showed no twinge of moral or social compunction, or concern for mother earth Ala, the female deity of fecundity. That a woman could desecrate the land after such an abomination without retribution is a pointer of the power of women's education in the breaking down of taboos and traditional mores. Clearly, Clara defied the land with impunity, unmindful of a public view of morality which is embodied in numerous songs such as the one by the Owerri people below in which the people criticize women who make a public display of such a rudimentary love act as kissing in public.

What an abomination at Nekedi
Where the land has been desecrated,
Where women invite men for a kiss.
May the gods dump them into a rubbish
Heap for initiating kissing to a man
(Alex Ohash, "Songs of Owerri," *ASPOC*, 1995, 5).

Rose Adaure (1989) confirms that such an attitude was prevalent at the time that women like Clara were terminating their unwanted pregnancies. Such women, who thought they were exercising their rights were regarded as deviant. The women and their families would carry the social stigma of abortion for a long time, if not for life (11).

In Achebe's later novels educated women consistently defy traditional taboos and mores. Such an attitude is rooted in education. Beatrice, for instance, in *Anthills of the Savannah* violates Igbo traditional behavior. Mad Medico, a male character in the novel, tells us that "Beatrice took a walloping honours degree in English from London University. She is better at it than either of us, I can assure you." (AOS 57). Mad Medico appears to be linking Beatrice's education with her sexual freedom. But Chris, a friend of Mad Medico and Beatrice's lover, provides an insight into her personality. On his relationship with Beatrice, he says:

> Wonderful! Of course she had been to my place quite a few times before, but the initiative had never come from her. It was not coyness but she had a style and above all a pace that I decided from the very beginning to respect. After the few whirlwind affairs I had had in my time including a full-fledged marriage in London for six months I was actually ready and grateful for BB's conservative style. Sometimes when I thought of her what came most readily to my mind was not roses or music but a good and tastefully produced book, easy on the eye. No pretentious distractions. Absolutely sound. . . (AOS 57-58).

Sometimes Beatrice is seen as a 'conservative', and also as a sex symbol, who flaunts her body seductively. In a society that still values tradition, Chris, the educated accountant, passionately loves Beatrice and remarks, that

> Beatrice is a perfect embodiment of my ideal woman, beautiful without being glamorous. Peaceful but very strong. Very, very strong. I love her and will go at whatever pace she dictates (AOS 58).

In other words, just as education is changing women's attitudes about tradition, and their behavior, it is also doing the same thing for many men.

Beatrice has power -- a sexual power linked with education -- that gives her access to the powerful men in society. That access to men of power is linked to sexual power also, and can be seen from the incident that occurred at the Presidential Retreat in Abichi village (AOS 67-74). His Excellency, hosting a party for an American journalist, Miss Lou Cranford, invites Beatrice along with other women to his party. After a few drinks, and consequently losing her inhibitions, the American journalist becomes "increasingly voluble and less restrained as the evening wore on" and her "manner with His Excellency was becoming outrageously familiar and domineering" (AOS 71). Competing with the American journalist for the President's attention, Beatrice flings herself at the President. Beatrice describes the incident as follows:

> So I threw myself between this enemy and him. I literally threw myself at him like a loyal batman covering his endangered commander with his own body . . . .
>
> I did it shamelessly. I cheapened myself. God! I did it to your glory like the dancer in a Hindu temple. . . .
>
> And I was glad the king was slowly but surely responding! Was I glad! The big snake, the royal

> python of a gigantic erection began to stir in the shrubbery of my shrine as we danced closer and closer to soothing airs, soothing our ancient bruises together in the dimmed lights. Fully aroused he clung desperately to me. And I took him then boldly by the hand and led him to the balcony railings. . . (AOS 74).

In contrast to women of traditional society, Beatrice uses her sexual power to rescue someone who is not even her husband, but her President. The similarity in her behavior and the American journalist's at the party brings into focus sexual freedom in two societies, Nigeria and America. Because Beatrice matches the American journalist in her sexual freedom, symbolically she represents the gigantic leap women have made in Nigerian society since the pre-colonial times.

Very often, the sexual aspects of Achebe's later novels degenerate into downright ribaldry. In one their heated arguments, Elewa, a semi-literate woman, yells profanities at her lover, Ikem Osodi, a journalist. She yells in Pidgin English (following is a translation of Elewa's speech):

> "You explain what? I beg you, no make me vex . . . . Imagine! Hmm! But women don chop sand for this world-o. . . . Imagine! But na we de

causam; na we own fault. If I no kuku bring my stupid nyarsh come dump for your bedroom you for de kick me about like I be football? I no blame you. At all!" (AOS 31)

(Translation)

"You explain what? Don't make me mad, please . . . . Imagine! Hmm! Women never seem to win in this wretched world. But it's actually our fault; we are our own worst enemy. If I didn't bring my 'pussy' to your bedroom to be 'fucked', would you be insulting me now as if you are kicking a ball? I don't blame you. Not at all!"

Elewa talks about her sexual relationship with Ikem unabashedly. The profanities in her speech show the recklessness of the sexually liberated, but semi-literate, 'modern' Nigerian woman. Elewa's self-indulgence in matters of sexuality is unheard-of in traditional society.

Another incident that reflects a pattern of changed life concerns the loose women who appear in *A Man of the People*. Obi, the protagonist of the novel, tells us about his sexual relationship with Elsie in the following remarks:

"Elsie was . . . the only girl I met and slept with the same day--in fact within an hour. I know

that faster records do exist . . . It was the way it happened. Good time girls." (23-24).

Achebe exposes the new sexual openness of the new urban women but probably could not know the extent of such action over time. However, he does capture the change in women's attitudes that was emerging in the society through Chris's evaluation of BB: "Her passion begins like the mild ripples of some tropical river approaching the turbulence of a waterfall in slow, peaceful, immense orbits. Pompous? No. Immense" (AOS 62).

By way of comparison, Achebe's women characters in earlier novels were discreet and demure. But in later novels, as shown above, caution in sex matters seems to have been thrown to the winds. The advance in women's education with its concomitant liberation and the growth of urban life were accompanied by the right to choose or not to choose sexual license. The introduction of higher education increased women's self-awareness, self-reliance, self-respect, and independent creativity.

Promiscuity, already identified by Achebe in *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), reaches mass proportion with the promotion of sex without conscience or inhibition. Achebe identifies the trend, but does not accurately foresee its magnitude. Neither did Achebe foresee women dating or

marrying younger men. In all of Achebe's novels, women were all younger than their husbands, and girls were younger than their suitors. The practice of older women dating or marrying younger men would have been an abomination in pre-colonial Igboland. Anagam Ononuju in the *Statesman* (July 1995, 12) and *Time Magazine* (1995, 3-4) is typical of the many voices pointing out that such news was fast becoming commonplace. Many of the women which Anagam Ononuju interviewed admitted without qualms to dating younger men. Some of these women, educated to at least high school level or beyond, were prepared to marry or even had married younger men. Of course, some women vehemently opposed the idea. Among these were the uneducated and those who live in rural communities.

In the news magazine interview with Ononuju, women offered various reasons for turning traditional values around by claiming that "age is a matter of the mind, a matter of feeling, and not of years" (*Time Magazine*, 1995, 3-4). Another emphasis from the interview was that younger men were generally more polite, kind, and happier than older men. As one woman said after being married to a younger husband, "He did not behave as if I am older. As there is love in our relationship, he takes charge and never feels intimidated about the age difference" (*Time Magazine*, 1995,

4). However, some young men marry older women for personal reasons, but some younger men believe that older women are kind and more thoughtful (*Statesman* 7). Whatever the reason, the new trend marks a shift in values which Achebe did foresee in his novels.

Another point of interest is the issue of independent, private women in Achebe's novels. In *Things Fall Apart*, Chielo, "the priestess of Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves" (35), was in ordinary life an unnoticed private woman, a widow with two children. Anyone seeing Chielo in ordinary life would hardly believe she was "the same person . . . who prophesied when the spirit of Agbala was upon her" (34-35). Possessed in her chanting, Chielo became the priestess of Agbala. Ekwefi recognized Chielo's stature when the latter was leading her into the bush on the way to the caves; "Chielo was not an ordinary woman that night" (TFA 75). The complex role which Chielo plays in Achebe's novel suggests that even in traditional Igbo society, some women were independent; and their independence did not prevent them from occupying important position in society.

Achebe's later works focus not on the supernatural aspect of women's power, but on the educational aspect in order to also explore the theme of the independent woman.

For example, in *Anthills of the Savannah*, Beatrice Okoh, a typical independent woman and a brilliant daughter of her country, was also a Senior Assistant Secretary in the Ministry of Finance. She was not from a local university, but from Queen Mary College, University of London. She "got involved into the lives of the high and mighty by accident which was not due to any shaming on her part. Of course, she perceived that some persons became high and mighty after she BB met them" (AOS 80). In her quest for independence and a private life she discovered more of herself in the world, and experience taught her "to be wary" in order to maintain her independence. She admitted to being "suspicious by nature," and by

> Being a girl of maybe somewhat above average looks, a good education, a good job you learn quickly enough that you can't open up to every sweet tongue that comes singing at your doorstep. Nothing very original really. Every girl knows that from her mother's breast although thereafter some may choose to be dazzled into forgetfulness for one reason or another (80).

In her independent life, she dismissed as "bullshit chauvinism" the old belief that a woman cannot be complete without a man. She argues,

> That every woman wants a man to complete her is a piece of male chauvinist bullshit I had completely rejected before I knew there was anything like Women's Lib. You hear our people say: "But that's something you picked up in England." Absolute rubbish (80-81).

She denies her attitude toward men as being derived from an English education by emphasizing that "there was enough male chauvinism in her father's house at home in Nigeria to last her seven reincarnations! All local sayings about marriage to BB were a whole baggage of father foolishness" (80). Achebe recognizes that tradition must give way to education, and that women, once educated, would no longer accept traditions they saw as chauvinistic.

Another example Achebe provides of the new woman liberated from tradition is Mrs. Eleanor John in *A Man of the People* (1966). She prefigures the many businesswomen and female members of contemporary society who, in advising politicians, are able to hold their own. Eleanor, an influential party woman from the coast (over three hundred and fifty-five miles away), joined the minister's entourage. Heavily painted and perfumed, but no longer young, she supported herself and was contented on her own. This woman was a very close friend of the ministers and her

proprietorship of many businesses seemed to demonstrate her political influence.

Eleanor was well known from the newspapers -- a member of the Library Commission and a member of one of the statutory boards within the Minister's portfolio. She wore "massive beads of coral which cost might be worth hundreds of pounds according to whispers circulating around her. Above all, she was the 'merchant princess' par excellence" (AMP 15). Eleanor has learned and excelled by experience.

> Poor beginning -- an orphan -- no school or education, plenty of good looks and an iron determination . . . beginning as a street hawker, rising as a small trader and then to a big second hand clothing -- worth hundreds of thousands (AMP 15).

Achebe's early fiction provides no incidences of this kind of single, independent women. This is not surprising because such women are a product of Western education, the postcolonial environment of indigenous political parties, and contemporary programs of national development and personal enterprise. Only the later novels which specifically mirror this developing milieu of Igbo or Nigerian society can realistically depict such new-age women.

The success of the pioneering independent Igbo women encouraged future generations of women, especially the educated who are now insistent in their quest for self-reliance and respect. Typical of such women both in fiction and in life is another Nigerian writer, Flora Nwakuche Nwapa, who typifies in every way the modern Igbo woman. Born in Oguta in Igboland and educated in Nigeria and abroad, Flora Nwapa became a teacher and served in supervisory roles in many schools in Nigeria during the 1970-1980s. Influenced by Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, she took up writing. Her first, and perhaps most outstanding writing was *Efuru* (1966); her successful writing career led her to establish her own printing press in Enugu, Nigeria. Speaking on behalf of other women, Nwapa, recently deceased, noted that

> There should be continued awakening of the consciousness of rural women to become involved for self-development, awareness, encouragement with new hope and direction. However, urban women should help the rural women to rise. *Better Life Programme* should centralize its process by realizing that "we are all rural". Public enlightenment should be intensified until men's wrong views about women are expunged. Our traditional Igbo men and

> many other African men view their women as downtrodden and uneducated. Often, these men cannot make a difference for both women and children. They don't want to know about us. They are amazed when I am introduced as a writer . . . . The educated African woman has done very well. We have worked to prove that we can stand on our two feet (Nwapa 52-59).

Flora Nwapa argued that "The African woman has benefited from the liberation movement in Europe and America which today has resulted in programs for women's studies" (59). She saw the future of Nigerian women as very bright in comparison to the Nigerian women of traditional culture. Nwapa thought education was still a privileged commodity, and that parents still give preference to boys in education.

In her novel, *Efuru* (1966), Flora Nwapa discussed women's failure of attitude -- not disrespect, not feminism -- but the neglect of self, or the indiscriminate rejection of womanhood (Brown, *Women Writers in Black Africa*, 122). As Lloyd Brown (1972) says of *Efuru* (1966),

> Efuru's personality and experience are symptomatic of her own community as a whole. The novel's structure enforces a sense of continuing and multiple cycles in the communal experience. The rituals of betrothal, marriage, birth and death are not only a

form of individual education: they are for all in man's community. . . (148).

Flora Nwapa observes the images of self in the traditional society, in her own marriage, and in the cause of the independent women worker in traditional Igbo society. As Brown (1972) also notes, Efuru, Nwapa's heroine, faces the fundamental implications of change in her private self as a woman, in her community as a whole, and in the universal patterns of time itself (149). *Efuru* (1966) does not destroy or deny the validity of communal tradition, but it does demonstrate the need for certain kind of women to establish their independence within the community, and for the community to accommodate that need.

The crucial issue in Efuru's development is the matter of choice. Efuru sees that in her symbolic image, like the goddess of the lake, she bestows the gift of wealth, beauty, happiness, and wisdom. The novel revolves around Nwapa's philosophy of life about independent women workers. In the closing chapter of her novel, she concludes thus:

> Efuru slept soundly that night. She dreamt of the woman of the lake, her beauty, her long hair and her riches. She had lived for ages at the bottom of the lake. She was as old as the lake itself. She was happy, she was wealthy.

> She was beautiful. She gave women beauty and wealth but she had no child. She had never experienced the joy of motherhood. Why then did the women worship her? (*Efuru* 221).

The contradiction in the worshipping of a barren goddess by women who are supposed to be their society's symbol of fertility is unmistakable. By worshipping a goddess who had never known the joy of motherhood, women in Efuru's society, which incidentally is also Achebe's society, may be indicating their desire to go beyond the confines of motherhood. They may also be reflecting the ambivalence that some women feel toward motherhood in the postcolonial society.

For decades, institutions such as the media and the educational system have been promoting the idea of gender equality and equity in Nigeria. They have helped to enlighten men and women, and the public in general, to discard traditional stereotypic ideas about the role or status of women in society. In Achebe's novels, we also see the influence of the school system on the emancipation of women. Government schools, missionary schools, and foreign schools educated women like Clara (*No Longer At Ease*), Elsie (*A Man of the People*) and Beatrice (*Anthills of the Savannah*).

In contemporary Nigerian society, the national government has taken bold steps to show concern for women. Political and economic measures have been introduced to change the lot of women. Privileged, educated, independent women also continue to sensitize and inform their fellow women about their potentials and lost opportunities. They have become politically and socially active in demanding more rights for women. Although Achebe's fiction does not directly portray such modern developments, it does foreshadow them. While successful independent women workers like Flora Nwapa have used both fiction and the political process to promote their own emancipation, male writers like Achebe can only present a sympathetic male perspective of the long and arduous process of emancipation. Indeed, his perspective provides a realistic view of how far women have come in a male dominated society.

# CHAPTER 6

## Summary and Conclusion

Achebe's perception of the role of women in Igbo society as demonstrated in his fiction is clearly a complex and fascinating subject. Especially is this so in the context of postmodernist sentiments in which the issue of sexual difference or gender representation in fiction has become one of the contentious subjects in contemporary literary criticism.

Historically, the role of women in Igbo society has undergone different stages of evolution from the time when Igbo society was essentially a traditional society, to the period when the society, like many other Nigerian ethnic societies, was under colonial rule, and also after the departure of colonial rule. Using these historical epochs as the focus of analysis, we have explored in previous chapters Achebe's representation of Igbo women in a society that has been characterized by sociological turmoil in its response to the historical events that shaped its evolution.

The traditional Igbo society is represented in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) with historical realism. The traditional society is represented in all of its charm and splendor, but also without ignoring its troubles and difficulties. Women are presented as matriarchal figures -- mothers, wives, and nurturers. They cook for their husbands and children, and farm on the family land owned legally by the husband. Like Ala, mother earth, or the earth deity, women are bound to the tradition of their society. On the other hand, male figures like Okonkwo bestride their world like a colossus, and rule their household with the iron hand of tradition.

Toward the end of *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe depicts the coming of colonialism into traditional Igbo society. Colonialism disrupted the stability of tradition, and men like Okonkwo pay with their lives for standing in the way of change. However, the disruption caused by colonialism did not immediately overturn the traditional roles of women in Okonkwo's household and other women like them in Igbo society.

The triumph of colonialism over traditional society is presented by Achebe in *No Longer At Ease* (1960), *A Man of the People* (1966), and *Arrow of God* (1967). In spite of colonialism, tradition was never totally discarded, hence

many women, especially in the villages, still functioned in their traditional roles as wives, mothers, and nurturers. Women in urban communities, on the other hand, benefited from the disruption caused by colonialism. Women like Clara *in No Longer At Ease* who were socially isolated because of their class were liberated from social prejudice and discrimination. Other women like Elsie in *A Man of the People* won control of their sexuality.

However, the disruption of tradition which allowed some women to gain and exercise freedom also produced men like Irre and Nanga who exploit women for their own gratification. Unlike traditional men such as Okonkwo and Ezeulu who maintain sexual liaisons in the context of matrimony, colonized men such as Irre and Nanga are promiscuous. Perhaps in response to the spirit of the times, women like Elsie also exercise their freedom to seek sexual liaisons without matrimony. Nonetheless, a 'war of the sexes' appears to have begun between men and women -- between those who have always exercised their freedom and those who now seek to exercise their own freedom.

This 'war of the sexes' comes into tragic dramatic relief in the postcolonial era, which Achebe demonstrates in *Girls At War* (1972) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). In the postcolonial era Achebe shows that women in Igbo society

have become more assertive, willing to risk matrimony and motherhood in order to wrench their freedom from the shackles of tradition.

The progression from tradition to modernity has been long and arduous, and the different stages of the progression have significant consequences for women in Igbo society. According to Achebe's art, the evidence of rebelliousness on the part of women conforms with the spirit of the times. In the traditional society of *Things Fall Apart*, little girls like Ekwefi assert themselves only against their siblings, not the patriarch. By the time the Igbo society enters the postcolonial era, girls like Beatrice in *Anthills of the Savannah* are becoming more assertive even against society's patriarchs. As Achebe demonstrates in *Girls At War* (1972), many women emboldened by their own successes were now challenging the old order of tradition, taking on unusual roles as soldiers and paratroopers, dressing as they choose, and exercising sexual license. Clearly, such actions deserve more treatment than Achebe actually gives them in his short story. The novel form rather than a short story would have allowed him to do just that. Nevertheless we see in the short story evidence of women's heroic deeds in the struggle to save the Igbo society. We also see that the roles of the 'modern' Igbo

woman are significantly different from those of Okonkwo's traditional society where women were always shielded from danger.

After the Civil War, the 'new' Igbo women emboldened by a new bohemian life style caused a social stir among Igbo traditionalists. The 'new women' were criticized not by Achebe, but by churches and oral artists. For example it is documented that a female song writer composed a song in which she derided her daughter-in-law's bohemian life style and called her a rude diviner masquerading as an educated woman. She also criticized her daughter-in-law for denying her gender, promoting promiscuity, and socializing the young with the wrong values (see Ohash 1974, 5).

Surely, we cannot accuse Achebe of censuring women's roles through his art; rather he is simply a portrayer of those roles. However, Achebe sometimes betrays his own ambivalence about some of the changes in the women's roles that he portrays. Even when he does not censure the changes, he does not openly celebrate them. For example, the dress code revolution of the 'new' Igbo women in the postcolonial era is not ceremonialized in Achebe's fiction. This may be an indication that Achebe is hesitant to endorse such changes.

Achebe recognizes the dilemma inherent in the transition from a social order based on tradition to one based on modernity. He predicts, through a character like Clara, the change in women's social roles. According to Achebe's fiction, even when women become Westernized and take on non-traditional roles they may still be caught up in tradition. Clara, for example, studied abroad and became a nursing sister, but the irony of Clara's foreign education is that she is still a nurturer, a role close to tradition. Through Clara, Achebe also demonstrates that some changes have a dark moral dimension to them. Clara's abortion, for example, is heinous enough for Achebe to dramatize. Yet by showing no remorse or appeasing no deity for her social infraction, Clara demonstrates the power of educated women to violate some social mores with impunity.

In other of Achebe's novels we see educated women consistently deny the validity of traditional taboos. Beatrice, for instance, comes from a strict home, but once she is educated her behavior no longer conforms to the codes of tradition. Unlike the women of traditional society, Beatrice is able to indulge her sexual fantasies. This type of sexual liberation is also found in the behavior of other 'modern' women such as Elsie in *A Man of the People* (1966) and the war heroines of *Girls At War* (1972).

Since Achebe wrote these works, the advancement in higher education for women and the growth of urban life have spawned a new set of rights for women, and perhaps a new set of problems. Achebe identifies the trend in his later works, but does not envisage the magnitude of what once would have been considered immoral behavior in contemporary Igbo society, a society that has lost the power to enforce its traditions.

In Achebe's later works education is seen as a crucial factor in strengthening the position of independent women. For example, Beatrice, the quintessential independent woman, is able to function as a top government official. Because Achebe recognizes that tradition must give way to education, and that women, once educated, will no longer accept traditions wholesale, he employs women like Beatrice (*Anthills of the Savannah*), and Elsie and Eleanor (*A Man of the People*) to convey this vision.

Perhaps Achebe did not perceive that within a few decades what had started with one or two women in his novel would become an epidemic. Many women have adopted the lifestyle of being independent, private, and single, and they show neither remorse nor shame, but continuous self-improvement and economic success. The Igbo educated elite now accepts their behavior as the norm. They are praised

instead of being treated as outcasts and lawbreakers. These women do not hate men or children; they simply want to take control of their own lives.

Today, there is a positive trend for educated, independent Igbo women workers to combine their careers with family. As the literacy movement grows, the pool of successful, independent women workers also grows. Of course, the independent women workers sometimes encounter problems, disappointments, and challenges from both traditional women and men, but the women, some of whom have also become fiction writers like Achebe himself, constantly strive to combat ignorance and prejudice. Other women have also become social activists to combat problems of poverty, starvation, and the exploitation of women. These women have also become role models to other women who look upon them as sources of inspiration and symbols of future hope (see Rosemary Oji, 1993, 14-15).

The arrival of women writers, journalists, educators, broadcasters, scientists, sociologists, economists, and other professionals has helped to tear down the walls of discrimination and prejudice. They have established genuine inter-cultural exchanges of studies for women in other countries; and developed awareness for higher education and an activism that seeks to enhance the condition of women and

change stereotyped attitudes and images. Attaining a status that has made them equals with men, women have shown how inadequate the traditional view of women is for a 'modern' society that seeks prosperity, and wishes to be a member of the world community in the modern age. Thus, Nigerian women in recent years have far exceeded even the 'prophetic' vision Achebe expressed in his fiction.

Because Achebe's fiction is not intended to assuage or hide his society's foibles, it presents the dynamics of his society, including its gender roles, with the objectivity of a serious artist. Gender roles in Achebe's society are neither static nor unchanging; in fact, their various stages of evolution are well depicted in Achebe's fiction. Although his images of Nigerian women may not conform to Western expectations, they clearly demonstrate how men and women in a non-Western society relate to one another. As Mineke Schipper (1989) points out "In the past the personal, evaluative judgement of African texts has often been given from a limited Western perspective, and often without the critic even being ware of his Eurocentricism" (7). The reading of Achebe's works with Eurocentric assumptions of gender relations, for example, will not produce an authentic picture of the society that the artist represents in his fiction. A more realistic approach to reading Achebe's

works is to interpret his fictionalized universe as depicting an unromaticized African society.

In assessing Achebe's representation of women in Igbo society, Achebe's gender itself may be an issue for some critics. On the issue of male writers vis-à-vis their representation of gender in fiction, Alicia Ostriker (1986) notes that "writers necessarily articulate gendered experience, just as they necessarily articulate the spirit of a nationality, an age, a language" (9). In other words, the question of whether Achebe's male perspective may have shaped his representation of Igbo women is very important. Does his gender make his representation unfair to women?

A male perspective is not necessarily a disadvantage in portraying women in fiction. Even a female perspective, in order to have any degree of realism, must represent events or society as objectively as possible. Achebe has, in the opinion of this writer, represented women in Igbo society as realistically as possible. Whether or not we like what we see in his representation, it matters not what his gender is. Male texts, as Elaine Showalter (1986) rightly points out, do not necessarily have to be read as documents of sexism and misogyny; and since there is no evidence of a misogynist agenda in Achebe's fiction, it is really puerile to criticize him for not making women look 'better' in his

fiction. In order to be true to his art, Achebe has represented Igbo women and the events that shaped them with the degree of realism that the representation deserves, and created a kind of mythic history of emerging modern African society.

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